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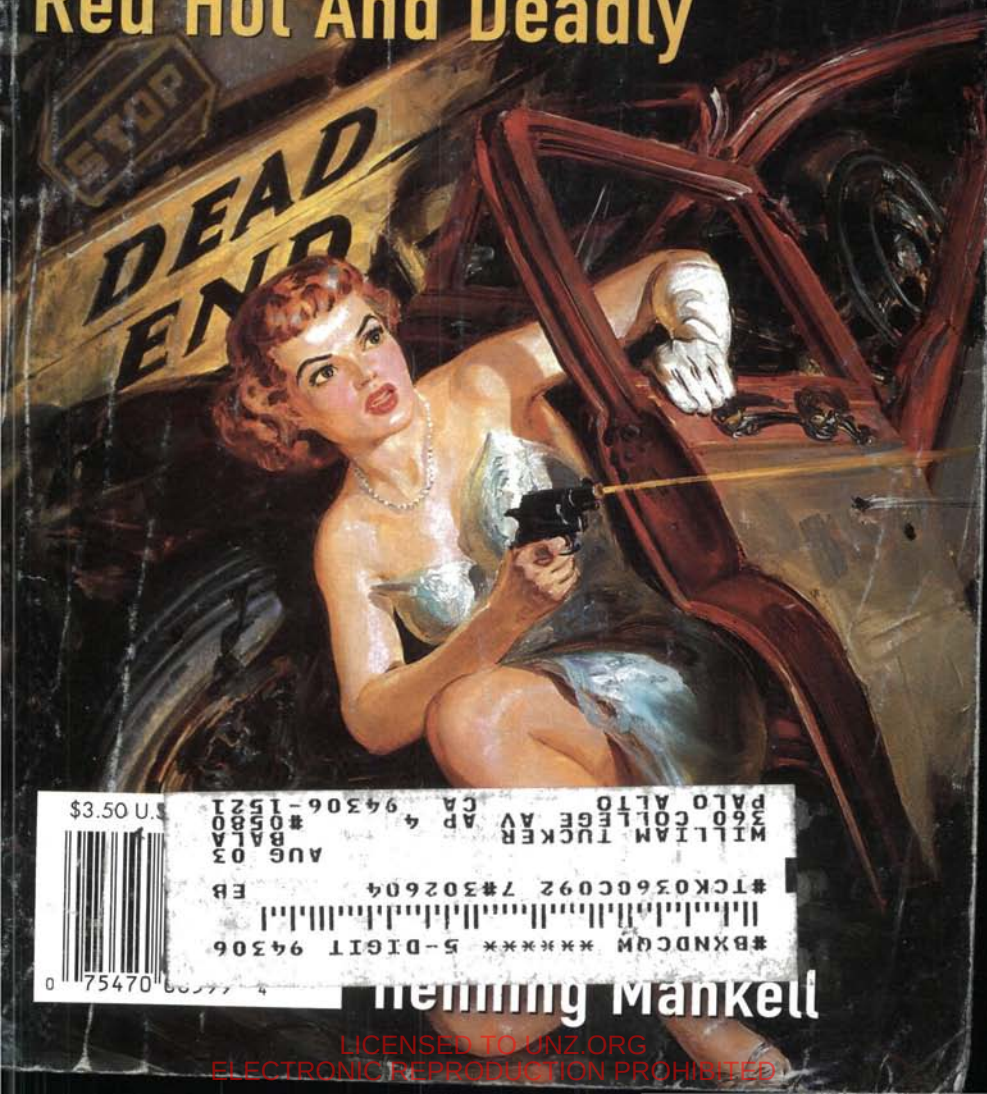

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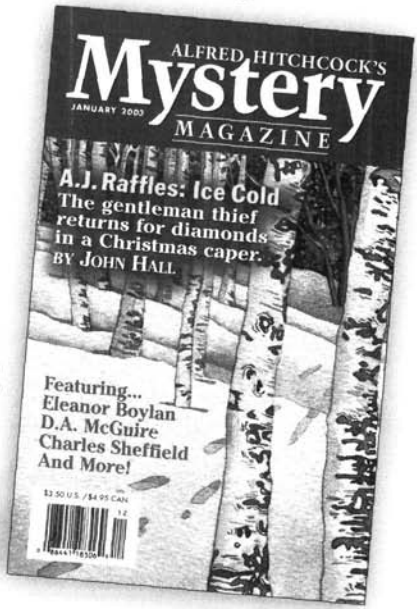

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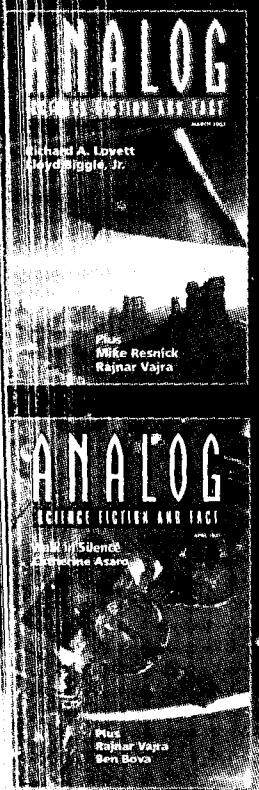

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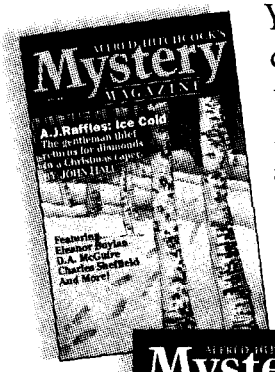

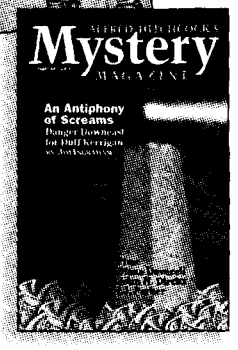

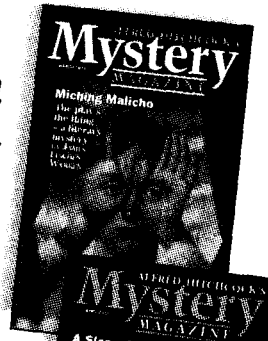

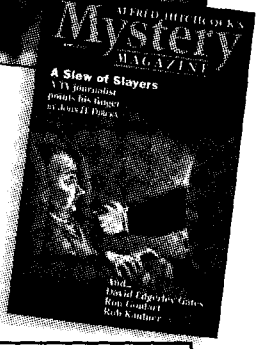

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Art by Mark Evans

PALACE IN THE PINES

by Doug Allyn

I was hoping he'd be magical. If I meet a car salesman I expect a spiel. A politician? A handshake and a pitch for my vote. So I thought Geno LaRosa might show me a trick or two. Find a quarter in my ear. Or make my troubles disappear.

TV Guide called Geno LaRosa the hippest magician in America. A new-wave Houdini—pop magic for the new millennium. He was a regular guest on the *Tonight Show* and *Letterman,* with his own specials on HBO and Showtime, where he made elephants and city buses vanish. I don't have cable, so I've never seen his shows. But I knew who he was.

I just couldn't figure out what he wanted. LaRosa is a big star. I run a low-rent construction company in Valhalla, northern Michigan. Upstate. Waaay upstate. Big lake country. The boondocks. Sometimes cell phones work up here, sometimes not. Relay towers are too few and far apart. We have plenty of trees, though. Pine forests, cedar swamps, rolling hills teeming with white birch, poplar, and balsam. Trees and more trees. A few small towns are linked by narrow ribbons of two-lane blacktop. But we have a

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lot more trees than people.

When my dad said Geno LaRosa called and asked me to meet him in the middle of noplace along the Lake Huron shore, I figured it was one of my buddies goofing. Or maybe Dad got the name wrong. Some days he can't remember mine.

But it was no joke. A limo was idling on the shoulder of the road, a uniformed driver leaning against the door. I wheeled my pickup truck in behind it.

A man and woman were in front of the limo, arguing about something. She was a stunner, tall and dark, her face framed by a perfect bouffant, every hair precisely in place. A New York supermodel. Or could have been.

He's a phenomenon! Your choice for third place in the 2002 Readers Award competition for the July 2002 story "Telephone to Forever," Doug Allyn has also been nominated for the 2002 Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story for "The Murder Ballads" (*EQMM* March 2002). On the night of May 1, 2003, when the Mystery Writers of America convene to present the Edgar awards and *EQMM* hosts a pre-banquet party for the Readers Awards, Mr. Allyn will receive two scrolls—and perhaps the Edgar itself. ¶

Her buddy was square as a barrel with a salt-and-pepper beard. Looked like a bear in a business suit.

Geno LaRosa was sitting alone, halfway up the hillside. He waved, so I made my way up to him.

He looked more like a grad student than a TV star. A good-looking guy. Photogenic. Intelligent eyes, lean jaw, shaggy mop dyed blond, fashionable two-day stubble. Dressed casually, blue jeans, Yale sweater, white tennies.

Not magical, though. All business. I introduced myself. Geno nodded politely, but didn't offer to shake hands. "I'll be frank, Mr. Shea, you aren't my first choice for this project. Not even my third." He handed me a folio. I recognized the architects, Cohen and Harding, a big firm, out of Detroit. And out of my league.

Flipping past the survey and title I found the master blueprints, scanned them. Blinked. Then examined them more closely, trying to quiet my heartbeat. This was big. A private home, log construction. Bigger than anything I'd ever done. Bigger than I'd ever seen. And I really needed the work. A job like this could . . .

And then it hit me. Damn, I'd never get this job. The more I looked at the plans, the further my heart sank. My company was just too small. He'd probably called me out here to satisfy some bank requirement for multiple bids. Damn, damn, damn.

"Looks like an interesting project," I said, rolling up the drawings. "Tell me about it."

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"It's all there in the plans—"

"It'll take me an hour to scan these properly, Mr. LaRosa. I'm sure you're a busy man. So am I. And since we're both standing here, why don't you just tell me what you want? Exactly. Unless you'd rather call the next builder on your list."

He glanced at me sharply, looking me over for the first time. I'm no fashion plate. Sandy hair cropped short for quick showers. Jeans and a T-shirt, faded but not fashionable. The tattoo on my arm covers a nasty burn scar from a welding torch. A poster boy for the working class. I expected to be blown off. Instead, he nodded. And actually smiled.

"Fair enough, Mr. . . . ? I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Shea. Dan Shea."

"Of course. Here's what I want, Mr. Shea. A house. Right here, on this hillside. Three stories, twenty-seven rooms, nine thousand square feet. Full-width balconies on all floors, facing Lake Huron. Five-car attached garage over there, ten-car garage with living quarters for staff on the far side of the hill. You with me so far?"

"Sure. A monster house with staff quarters close by but out of sight. I noticed you specified log construction. Are you a big Abe Lincoln fan or do you just like to make things tough for contractors?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that. Are you familiar with the Chinese principles of feng shui?"

"I've read about them, sure. The basic idea is that an ideal house should contain all the natural elements—wood, fire, and water—and face in the proper direction."

"Which in this case will be northeast, toward the lake and the rising sun. I had a Tibetan shaman flown here to bless the site. He said it was a magical spot."

"It's a great-looking hill, all right," I acknowledged. "How much land do you have here?"

"Twenty-five hundred acres. Completely undeveloped woods and swampland. I also bought the airfield outside Valhalla. I'm a licensed pilot and I have my own Lear jet. Weather permitting, Detroit's only forty minutes away."

"This far north, the weather doesn't always cooperate, Mr. LaRosa. And your site's pretty isolated."

"So it is. Do you know what I do for a living, Mr. Shea?"

"Sort of. You're a magician. On TV."

"It's a great life, but I spend a lot of time traveling. Sometimes it all starts to feel . . . ephemeral. I tell jokes, do some illusions, and it's on to the next theater, the next town, the next country. Hotels, motels, airports. Places and faces start to blur. Sometimes I really need to get away from all that."

"You've picked the right spot, then. You're fifteen miles from Val-

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halla, which pretty much qualifies this place as the middle of nowhere."

"That's precisely why I chose it. I want my home to be a haven, Mr. Shea. A log fortress away from the world. I want it to have roots, to belong here, on this spot. As though someone built it centuries ago and it will stand a thousand years after we're gone. I want timbers that grew in this ground and stones from these hills. Whenever possible, I'd prefer to use local craftsmen, men who care about their work. Still with me?"

I chewed my lip, thoughtfully looking over the site. Rough country. Only one road, but there was a county power line a mile or so to the south. . . . Doable. I felt the conviction growing in my gut. I could make something wonderful happen here. The hillside sloped gently down to the lapping waters of Lake Huron, roses growing wild along the shore, towering pines, white and red, the breeze whispering through their boughs. And for a moment, only a moment, I caught a glimpse of what the house would look like.

Magnificent. A palace. In the pines.

"You're smiling," LaRosa said. "Is something funny?"

"If it is, the joke's probably on me. Straight up, Mr. LaRosa, the architectural firm that did your plans recommended a half-dozen builders. I don't see my name on their list. So why am I here?"

"The realtor who sold us the property recommended you. Said you had grit and ambition, a young man on the move. Not unlike myself."

"I've got a great crew and we do first-class work, but we've never built anything this size. All the contractors on your architect's list are reputable. So why didn't you . . . ?" And suddenly I knew. "Hell, you did call them, didn't you? And they all tried to talk you out of it, right?"

He nodded. "Something like that. One problem with being an entertainer, nobody takes a clown seriously. Three different contractors pooh-poohed the idea of building with local materials. Impractical. They said a house this size has to be fabricated off-site, everything precut to size at a factory, then freighted in and assembled. Like a Tinkertoy. Better quality, less expensive, and a lot simpler to build. What do you think of that, Mr. Shea? Are they right?"

"Definitely simpler to build," I admitted, scanning the plans again. "Not necessarily cheaper. Freighting in the logs and using two or three factory work crews at once would speed up construction, but they'd be in a hurry to finish up and get out. Local crews, custom fitting timbers at the site, would definitely take more time, but the craftsmanship would be superior. And they're used to working with local materials."

"How much time difference are we talking about?"

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"Precut at the factory, the project could be done in . . . twenty-four to twenty-eight weeks. With local materials, add another month, minimum."

"Two contractors claimed it couldn't be done at all. Something about logs from this part of the country being too short?"

I digested that one, flipping through to the specifications page. "Logs in precut structures of this size are usually ponderosa pine from big timber farms out West. They grow 'em in fields like wheat, straight as telephone poles. Michigan pines live through more weather. Wind, snow. The wood's denser and . . . ah. Here's the problem. Seventy-foot rafters and purlins. Wow. They were right. Local timbers don't grow nearly this long."

"So it can't be done?"

"I didn't say that. My daddy says there are at least three ways to do anything, you just have to find 'em. Here are your options. One, use local timbers for the walls, floors, and ceilings and import longer logs for the rafters and main beams. The problem is, the grain will be visibly different. Western pine is cleaner, fewer gnarls, less character. Twenty feet overhead, it'll look phony. Option two, use structural steel instead of log rafters, box it in with local pine. If it's done right, the seams won't show, and you can dispense with some of these support corbels, here and here, in the great room and the dining room. Open them up to the sun a little more."

"You said three ways. What's the third option?"

"You've already heard it. Precut the logs at a factory, truck them in. If you wanted to do that, I wouldn't be here."

"What I want is in those plans. I love to travel but I need a place of my own, too. Something real. Something . . . substantial."

"This'll be substantial, all right. It'll be a palace, in the pines."

"A palace in the pines." He nodded, smiling. "I like the sound of that. So, what do you think? Can you build me a palace, Mr. Shea?"

"As I said, a bigger company could—"

"All I've gotten from bigger companies is a lot of guff about why it's impossible. I do the impossible for a living. Straight up, Shea, can you make this happen or not?"

"Yes, sir. I can build your palace, Mr. LaRosa. Exactly the way you want it, rocks, trees, feng shui, the works. I can get it done."

"Fair enough. Leo! Clarissa! Come up here! Conference!" Leo and the lady started climbing up, but the going was rough. High heels and tight skirts aren't designed for north-country hillsides. "How long will construction take, Mr. Shea?"

"I'll have to check the plans—"

"Ballpark," he interrupted impatiently. "If I want to spend Christmas here, will I be able to?"

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I thought a moment. "Sure. I can't promise the outbuildings, but barring a disaster we can have the main house livable by December."

"Terrific," he said as the other two came stumbling up. "Leo, Mr. Shea's going to handle this project for me. Haggle enough to earn your ten percent, but make it happen, clear?"

Leo looked me over, taking my measure in a millisecond. He wasn't impressed. "Whatever you say, Geno. We'll get it done."

"Clarissa, Shea here promises the house will be livable by Christmas. We could get married over the holidays, invite some people up, work in the wedding and a housewarming between Vegas and the Japanese tour. Does that work for you?"

She frowned, then nodded. "Sure. We can do that."

"Great. I don't want anything heavy, now. No press, no fans, just the usual suspects and—"

"It's covered," Clarissa said with a flash of irritation. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"That's my girl. Now, about the house. Mr. Shea here says he's up for the job but he's never built a palace before. I need someone here to coordinate this, deal with problems and make decisions on the spot. I can't be worrying about wallpaper patterns while I'm onstage in Berlin. I want you to stay and oversee the project."

"Me?" Clarissa echoed. "But—"

"It has to be you, Clare. I'll be on tour in Europe for May and June, Brazil after that. A million things are going to come up here and you know what I like. I want this place perfect for us. You're the only one I trust to make it that way."

She started to argue, then opted not to. "Okay," she said, eyeing me doubtfully. "I'll handle it."

"Great. Done deal. I have to be in Iowa by seven so I gotta go. Mr. Shea can find you a place to stay somewhere nearby. I'll call you from Des Moines, love. Come on, Leo."

And that was it. Most of my clients spend more time choosing bathroom rugs than LaRosa took for a mansion. Geno and his manager hurried down the hillside to the limo and roared off down the dirt road.

Leaving me with his fiancée. Eyeing each other like stray dogs.

"Clarissa Landis," she said, offering her hand, breaking the ice. "And you are . . . ?"

"Dan Shea," I said, still shaken by the suddenness of it all. An hour ago I was scrounging for a job to cover my mortgage payment. Now I had the biggest project I'd ever seen dumped in my lap. And I had to finish it by Christmas. I opened the plans to the site layout, trying to orient myself.

"So," Clarissa said. "How do we make this work?"

Lost in the plans, I scarcely heard her.

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"Wrong," she said, gently folding the plans closed, facing me. "That's not how it's going to work, Mr. Shea. Let's get things straight from the git-go. Geno hired you because he thinks you can do the job. But he didn't get where he is by ducking tough decisions. When it comes to business, he's a hard-nose. The moment he thinks you can't hack it, you'll be gone. And I'll be the one grading your report card. Do we understand each other?"

"I'm not sure. How much do you know about construction, Miss Landis?"

"Call me Clare. Not much, but I can learn. I'm no bimbo, Mr. Shea. I'm a CPA with a master's degree in contract law. I've negotiated every project and contract Geno's been involved with for the past five years."

"I thought Leo was the business manager."

"Leo's a haggler. He lines up deals, I close them and follow through afterward to make sure everything works. But I'm not your enemy, Mr. Shea. I'm on your side. I want this to go well. And finish on time. By Christmas."

"I expect so. Have you two been engaged long?"

She glanced at her watch. "About four and a half minutes, give or take."

I blinked. "You mean . . . ?"

"Right, that was it. Geno's proposal, wedding plans, housewarming, the whole bit. Happily ever after in a heartbeat. And it's okay. A moonlight proposal on bended knee would have been cute but it's not Geno. And I'd marry him at the bottom of a well if he asked me to. He's a marvelous man."

"He must be. And I see what you mean about making tough decisions in a hurry."

"Really? You think proposing to me was a tough decision?"

It was the first time I'd seen her smile. An impish smile, a little crooked in one corner. Supermodel beauty, intelligence, plus a sense of humor? I felt a pang of envy. Geno was a lucky guy. And so was I, if I could make this work.

"There's a joke in the construction business, Miss—sorry—Clare. A guy's haggling with a builder. I'm pretty handy, he says. Suppose I help you? Will that change the price?

"Sure, the builder says. With your help, I'll do the job for a thousand bucks. If you don't help, it'll be five hundred."

Her smile faded. "That's a joke?"

"An old one. The point is—"

"I get the point, Mr. Shea. I'm not sure you got mine. I won't tell you how to build Geno's palace, but I'm going to make damned sure it's finished exactly as planned and on schedule. If you have questions, I'll get answers; if you have problems, I'll help solve them. But if I think you're the problem, I'll solve that, too. Clear?"

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"Clear."

"Good. When do we start?"

"It's not that simple. I'll need a written contract and a deposit before—"

"No problem," she interrupted. "I'll have Leo fax a working agreement to us at your offices. Geno told him to make this happen, so the terms will be more than fair and I have power of attorney to sign for Geno. How big a deposit will you need?"

I flipped through the plans to the architects' construction cost estimates. And swallowed. It was nearly seven million. My end would be fourteen percent of that. More money than I'd ever seen in my life. Clare glanced over my shoulder.

"The standard deposit is half down, correct?"

"That's normal, but—"

"Tell you what, I'll have a hundred thousand deposited in your personal account this afternoon as a binder. We'll keep a working balance, say, three million, in a joint corporate account. I'll be your financial officer for this project. I may not know construction, but I can crunch numbers faster than IBM. Tell me what you need, I'll make it happen. I'll need a place to stay. What's available?"

"There's a Holiday Inn outside the village, plus a couple of nice bed-and-breakfasts—"

"The Holiday Inn will do. I'm used to motels. Shall we go?" But as she turned to leave, she hesitated, looking around as though seeing it, really taking it all in, for the first time. The swaying pines, the hillside rolling down to the lake, waves nuzzling the shore. "My God," she said softly, "what an incredibly lovely spot this is."

She was right. It was. And I wondered if anything I could build here, even a mansion, would be worthy of this magical ground. But I had to admit that Geno's fiancée, sun-dappled, with the spring breeze tousling her perfect hair, belonged in a palace.

We met that evening in the Holiday Inn's private dining room. A business dinner to discuss the nuts and bolts of getting the project under way. But it was personal, too. We traded histories and ideas, fumbling our way toward the working relationship we'd need to get this thing done.

Clare was strictly New York City. Grew up broke but artsy. Her father was a struggling stage director, her mom a part-time actress. Clare worked her way through CCNY, hired on with the William Morris talent agency after graduation.

Geno LaRosa was one of their biggest clients. After she got him out of a Jersey casino contract, he hired her for his personal staff. No hanky-panky, strictly business.

She'd been with him five years, the last two as his girlfriend.

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And now his fiancée. She was so happy she practically bubbled. And I couldn't help wondering if any woman's eyes would ever shine like that for me. I grew up hardscrabble poor in the north country. Quit school to support my family. Clawed my way up from timberjack to carpenter to crew boss of my own company. Put two sisters and my little brother through college. My dad lives with me now, takes care of the house, cooks a little.

"He doesn't work with you?" Clare asked.

"He's busted up. Logging accident took one leg twenty years back. He's drifty when he drinks. Worse when he doesn't. He takes some looking after."

"You're not married?"

"No time. You don't meet many women at north-woods construction sites. Unless you count she-bears."

"I think you could do better than a bear, Mr. Shea. Do you have anything against working with women?"

"Not really. My bookkeeper's a nice lady, seventy-two. But construction's a different deal. Working in rough country isn't like building in the city. Big trees falling, heavy machinery plowing unstable ground. Screw up in the city, you get sued. Make a mistake out here, you wind up minus a leg, like my dad. Or maybe dead. It's hard, dirty work. And risky. It's no place for a woman."

"No?" she smiled, leaning back. "We'll see about that."

She showed up at the hillside the next day, wearing shiny new hobnailed boots, a flannel work shirt, and pristine jeans. Even had her hair tied back in a ponytail. Like she'd stepped out of a fashion layout in a Marshall Field's catalog. In that getup, anyone else would have looked ridiculous. Clare just looked like her own younger sister. Not as sophisticated, but even prettier. To me, anyway.

The site was already a madhouse. Puck Paquette, my big, slow Canuck foreman, was marking off the foundation for the concrete contractor while the rest of my crew cleared the site, cutting brush and dropping trees, prepping the hilltop for major surgery.

I kept an eye on things, but mostly I worked the phone, lining up the list of subcontractors we'd need for this job, everything from electricians to iron workers.

Fortunately it was early in the season, and the sheer size of the project made it easy to collect crews. In a part of the country where an early snow can steal two months' wages, everyone was happy to sign on. It had been a long winter. We were all hungry as bears.

But not greedy. Not yet. That would come later, when they realized how big the job was and how much money was involved. I had a backup list for every contractor I hired. The first one who tried

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to jack up his price would be fired on the spot. No discussion, no appeal. Gone. A lesson to the others.

I've always been an easy boss. Too easy, maybe. LaRosa's palace was my big chance, and I was already picking up attitude from the owner. Geno wasn't the only one who could make hard decisions in a hurry.

After a few hours of hovering around the site, Clare asked me to put her to work. I'd half expected the request after her remarks the night before, considered trying to talk her out of it. Decided to teach her a lesson instead.

So I loaned her my smallest chain saw, a Stihl sixteen-incher, and took twenty minutes to teach her the basics: how to hold it, where to notch a trunk, to crank the saw wide open before starting a cut. Woodcraft 101. Then I turned her loose on a copse of seedling jack pines, none taller than five feet, the easiest, safest job on the site.

Clare waded in with a will. I went back to work with the layout crew, marking boundaries, driving stakes. But keeping an eye on Clare as well. I figured she'd fade in the first twenty minutes.

She didn't. She kept at it nonstop for nearly two hours before I noticed the telltale signs of fatigue. I approached cautiously. More Woodcraft 101. Never startle somebody who's swinging a chain saw. Unless you want your body parts scattered over a wide area.

"Yo," I called, stepping into her line of vision. "Take five."

"I'm okay," she said, straightening, licking sweat off her upper lip. "Really."

"Actually, you're doing great for a rookie," I admitted, "but you're tiring now. Some people slow down, some speed up. You're speeding up. Tired people make little mistakes, only there aren't any minor mistakes with chain saws. Take a break."

"You're the boss," she said, easing down the saw, looking around. "Wow, the hill's half bald already. Your men work fast."

"Knocking trees down is easy. Putting something half as pretty in their place is the hard part." She leaned against a big pine, catching her breath as I pointed out the various crews, explained what each group was doing, then outlined the order of battle for the next few weeks.

Grading would begin as soon as we finished clearing, then we'd run in a temporary power line for electric lights and pour the foundation and footings. Then the real work would start.

She took it all in and asked a few pointed questions. A very bright woman. Then she picked up her chain saw.

"You really don't have to do this, you know," I said.

"I know. And any minimum-wage high-school kid could probably do a better job than I will. But I want to do it. When we're finished, this will be my house, too. I'll be married here, raise my

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children here if we're lucky. So I don't want to be a spectator, Mr. Shea. I want to have a hand in building some small part of it, every step of the way. Will you help me do that?"

"It'll be my pleasure, Miss Landis. Every step of the way."

"And if I get underfoot, you'll tell me, right?"

"You'll be the first to know. Promise."

"Thanks," she said, giving me a quick peck on the cheek. "It means a lot to me. Now, out of my way, bozo, I've got trees to drop." Setting her hard hat at a jaunty angle, she did a perfect lumberjack swagger back to her little copse. Leaving me smiling in spite of myself.

I went back to work, too, but I found it hard to concentrate. At odd moments Clare's elfin smile kept flickering across the video screen of my memory. And I could still feel the warmth of her lips against my cheek.

By midsummer, the house was already taking shape. The foundations were down and dry, power and sewer lines were laid, and the walls were rising. Building with logs is vastly different from standard construction. In a stick-built house, you raise the framework first, roof it over, then side it. With the interior protected from the elements, several crews can work at once, electricians and plumbers, for example. The whole process speeds up.

With logs, everything waits for the walls, and they're raised exactly as they were back in Abe Lincoln's day, stacked up one stick at a time, each one matched and hand-fitted to the one below. LaRosa's palace was far too large for single logs to span any part of it, so we had to butt them end to end, which meant more matching and hand-fitting. It's like assembling a 3-D jigsaw puzzle with slippery pieces that weigh three hundred pounds each. Tricky, dangerous work.

Ordinarily, the first five tiers are stacked by hand, but since we were going up three stories, I set cranes up at opposite ends of the building and ran two stacking crews simultaneously, dawn to dark, then continued working another four hours by artificial light.

Clare came out to the site almost every day, helping in small ways, gofering, carrying planks. Something. But she spent most of her days on the phone, arranging deliveries, badgering or sweet-talking suppliers, making sure the materials were delivered to the site on time and in the proper order.

She was really good at it. Without her help, the sheer size of the project and the thousand petty problems that cropped up every damned day would have snowed me under. But they didn't. Because Clare coped with them, carrying the load for me.

Puck Paquette, my grizzly-sized foreman, adopted Clare like a

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stray pup. Taught her the lore of lumberjacking and woodcraft, and to curse like a logger. Clare soaked it up, loving every minute.

She also had a sharp eye for problems. Too sharp, sometimes. She cornered me during a lunch break at the site, pulling me aside.

"One of your crew is drunk."

"Which one?"

"A welder. The dark one, with the ponytail. Looks like an Indian."

"He is an Indian. Ojibwa, full blood. His name's Mafe Rochon. But he's not just a welder. He's a freakin' genius with a torch."

"He's also loaded."

"Nah, he drinks but he's not wrecked. See this tattoo on my arm? It covers a scar I got with a cutting torch. I was lucky. At three thousand degrees, flesh doesn't burn, it vaporizes. With a torch, your margin for error is exactly zero, especially when you're working high steel. If Mafe was loaded, he'd be dead already."

"I can't believe you're defending him."

"Hey, I'm defending us. If we want to finish by Christmas, I need the best men I can get. I don't like Mafe, he's a troublemaker and a mean drunk. But there aren't five guys on the planet as good as he is with a torch. I need him."

"Then talk to him about his drinking before he kills himself or somebody else."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll definitely talk to him."

And I did. And Mafe told me to screw off, which I expected. But he did cut back on the wine for a while. I settled for that. So did Clare. She knew he was still drinking, but let it pass. A very quick study.

Most days flew by in a blur. Clare would track me down at the site, rattle off a list of problems that needed my attention. I'd make a decision or she would, and on to the next. We had working dinners twice a week but I was too exhausted to be of much use. Once I fell asleep at the table in mid sentence. Clare booked a room for me at the inn to save me the drive home.

After ordering the desk not to wake me before ten, she hit the site the next morning to get things under way. I woke late, charged out to the job in a rage. Which Clare promptly jollied away. If I was too beat to eat, I wasn't sharp enough to boss work crews through a fourteen-hour day.

She was right. But more importantly, she made her point without pulling rank or busting my chops. A remarkable woman. Smart, lovely, likable. And despite the pressures and problems, we were becoming friends. Good friends. The kind who talk about real things. Life, love, and What It's All About. Buds.

And maybe slightly more than that. On my part, anyway. But I wouldn't admit it, even to myself. Kept pushing it to the back of my mind. I was working like a madman on the biggest job I'd ever

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seen, let alone bossed. Building a goddamn magnificent mansion. A palace in the pines.

This job could change my life, set me up financially, open doors to deals I could scarcely imagine. I wasn't about to blow it all over a dumb-ass schoolboy crush on the owner's fiancée. And that's all it was. A crush. Puppy love. On a one-way street.

Geno LaRosa only showed up at the site twice. The first time was during the final fury of topping off the walls. Men screaming at each other, cranes roaring, timbers soaring skyward.

He didn't stay long. Clare showed him around for half an hour, then they left in his limo. Geno seemed a bit awed by it all. Intimidated by the chaos he'd created. The dirt, the noise. Or maybe he only wanted to be alone with Clare. At the Holiday Inn. I was glad he didn't hang around the site. A star underfoot was a distraction for the crews. As to where he and Clare went and what they did? I tried not to think about that. Hated the scenes flitting through my imagination. I handled it. But I wasn't much fun to be around for a few days.

Geno's second visit changed everything.

By late July we had the walls up, floors down, and a roof overhead. After the colossal battle of wrestling timbers into place atop a sixty-foot wall, installing wiring, plumbing, paneling was almost a pleasure. There were still a million problems to solve, and a mountain of work to be done, but the scale was smaller.

Logistics were crucial now, making sure each crew had what they needed in the right order. Plumbing and wiring before paneling and fixtures. Windows and doors installed with slip joints to allow for settling, with every step of the work okayed by the county building and electrical inspectors.

We were still under tremendous pressure, but it wasn't the craziness of rough construction. I was more of a field general than a combat commander now. It felt good.

I'd gotten into the habit of coming out to the site at sunrise, strolling through the mansion with a cup of coffee, checking everyone's handiwork, plotting out my day.

I knew Geno LaRosa was planning to visit sometime during the week, so I wasn't surprised to find a Lincoln limo parked beside a bulldozer. There were no lights showing, no one around. LaRosa probably left the car and rode into town with Clare. To the Holiday Inn. Damn.

I couldn't keep the pictures out of my mind. Geno and Clare together, in her room. They haunted me as I stalked the halls of his half-built palace. Trying to concentrate on my work. And failing.

I almost fell over them. In the master bedroom, third floor, with a balcony and a magnificent view of the lake.

It had no doors yet, and I wasn't expecting anyone. I wanted to

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check the windows for plumb, but I didn't get that far. Two steps into the room I froze. Something was out of place.

A sleeping bag. Sprawled in the center of the floor. Geno LaRosa was wrapped up in it, snoring softly, his forearm across his eyes, dead to the world.

As I started to tiptoe back out, I realized Clare was in the shadows at the balcony window, watching the dawn break on the horizon, tinting Lake Huron a burnished bronze.

She was barefoot, wearing nothing but Geno's shirt, her dark hair loose about her shoulders. Framed in the morning glow, she was so achingly lovely that for a moment I couldn't move. Couldn't even breathe. Felt a pain in my chest so deep I thought I might break in half.

Maybe I groaned. Or perhaps Clare sensed my presence. She turned. And our eyes met and held. And I couldn't help myself. Everything I felt for her, all the words, the emotions, were in that look. But there was no reply for me. Only sympathy. And kindness. The wordless compassion of one friend for another.

And then she looked away. Tugged Geno's shirt closed and turned back to the dawn. As though I wasn't there at all.

And perhaps for her, I wasn't.

I backed out quietly, made my way down to my truck, and sat behind the wheel. Shaking. When the work crews arrived, I helped the electricians wire up the basement, staying as far from that third-floor master bedroom as I could.

Geno and Clare found me later in the morning. LaRosa congratulated me on how quickly the home was taking shape and we discussed trouble spots in the construction. He made a few suggestions and his ideas were sound. Clare was right, he was a bright guy. Quick as a Pentium chip.

But at one point, when Clare was explaining the technique we used to set the rafters in place, I noticed Geno eyeing her in an odd way. Frowning.

And it dawned on me how different she was from the fashion plate who'd stumbled up the hillside in high heels that first day. Her hair was tied back now, the sun and wind had reddened her cheeks, highlighting a few freckles.

I thought she was far more beautiful now. But Geno had proposed to Clarissa Landis, the impeccable New York mannequin. And I wondered what he thought of this brash country girl in the flannel shirt and boots who could laugh it up with lumberjacks.

Geno flew out the next day, headed for Spain on the final leg of his European tour. Clare and I got back to work. But not back to normal. That sunrise moment in the master bedroom was there between us.

I'm not a subtle man. I don't lie worth a damn and I'm not good

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at concealing my emotions. She knew exactly how I felt now. She read it in my eyes that morning. But we never spoke of it. We continued working together, meeting for dinner once or twice a week as though nothing had happened.

But it had. I'd changed. Everything I'd ever wanted, everything I considered important had turned upside down. I've always put my work first. Had to. To support my family and make my way in this world. Never doubted it was the right thing to do.

Until now. When I realized I was working like a dog to build a magnificent mansion so the woman I loved could live happily ever after in it. With another man.

A cosmic joke. On me. But I wasn't sophisticated enough to laugh it off. It hurt too much. I felt as if my heart had been seared with Mafe Rochon's acetylene torch. All I know is work, so I poured my pain into building the palace. And took my rage out on the men.

The construction continued at a furious pace, but the pressure was building. Tempers were fraying. I was pushing too hard and I knew it. But I was too angry to back off. Something had to break. And it did.

A cup.

We were in the private dining room at the Holiday Inn going over invoices. Clare was sipping coffee when the cup slipped out of her hand, slopping cappuccino all over the paperwork.

Grumbling, I was mopping up the mess when she bounced a soggy napkin wad off my forehead. I nearly blew my stack. Dammit, this was serious! The plans could have been ruined—

She whizzed another paper wad past my ear and I just couldn't resist the mischief in her eyes. Ducking below the table, I threw a french fry back at her. She countered with half a sandwich and our business dinner erupted into a food fight free-for-all, dodging around the room pelting each other with napkin bombs and potato wads, laughing so hard the manager stuck her nose in to check on the noise. And got splattered for her trouble.

Afterward, as we were picking up the papers, sorting them out, Clare touched my arm.

"Danny, I know you have feelings for me, and I care for you, too, but . . ."

"But not enough."

"Not the same way. You have to let this go. It'll wreck everything if you don't."

"I don't know if I can, Clare. I've tried, but . . ."

"You have to. This is the happiest time of my life, and helping you build this house has been a wonderful part of it. Don't ruin it for me, Danny. Please."

"Okay. If that's what you want, enough said. Forget about it. I've been handling trouble all my life. I'll handle this, too. I promise."

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"I'll drink to that," she said, pouring us both a fresh mug of coffee. But as we raised them in a toast to seal the bargain, Clare's cup slipped from her fingers. Again.

I thought she was still kidding around. But she wasn't.

The next day, Mafe Rochon came in wrecked. He was working on the second-floor balcony, tack-welding curlicues onto the cast-iron railing, sparks flying, singing to himself in French. Happy as a clam, drunk as a lord. I could smell it on him five feet away.

I tapped him on the shoulder. He glanced up, gave me a bleary grin, and went back to his work. I was about to yank him to his feet when Puck Paquette grabbed my arm, hauled me off.

"What the hell you doing, Danny?"

"Firing Rochon's ass! He's drunk. I warned him."

"Warnin's don't mean nothin' to Mafe. He's a stone wino, you know that. Knew it when you hired him. He stayed sober a week after that last time you talked to him. Mean as a grizzly with the crabs. He ain't too drunk to work. I been keepin' an eye on him."

"Then you'd better watch him a damn sight closer, Puck! If I catch him drinking on the job again it'll be your ass, too—"

"Mr. Shea! Puck! You'd better get down here!" one of the carpenters yelled from the kitchen.

We were both sprinting downstairs before he finished. The panic in his voice cut through the noise like a hacksaw.

"It's Miss Landis," he explained as I bulled past him into the kitchen. Clare was sitting on the floor, her back against a cabinet.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly. "I fell."

"What happened?" I asked, kneeling beside her.

"I don't know. My knees just wobbled and, um . . . I can't seem to make my legs work, Danny. I'm not hurt or anything. If I can just rest here a minute—"

"Not a chance," I said, scooping her up in my arms. "Hold the fort, Puck, I'm taking Clare into town."

Valhalla is too small for a hospital. All we have is a doc-in-the-box clinic run by a Mormon couple from Utah. They did some quick tests, didn't like the results, and promptly sent Clare off in an ambulance down to University Hospital in Ann Arbor. I followed in my pickup. Pedal to the metal all the way.

At the U they ran more tests. Nobody said much, but they frowned a lot. I wanted to call Geno and notify Clare's parents but she forbade it. No point in worrying anybody. Not until we knew something.

I tried to stay in touch with the project, talked to Puck every day, worked out the construction snags as best I could over the phone.

Puck never said it, but I knew what he was thinking. This was my project, a monster of a job. It needed me. What the hell was I doing babysitting the boss's girlfriend in Ann Arbor?

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He was dead-ass right and I knew it. But I didn't care.

It took ten days of tests and retests, EMGs, CAT scans, MRIs before they finally told us what it all meant.

By then Clare had been assigned to a specialist, a neurologist, Dr. Khalid. Tall, bald, and beige. And gentle. Eyes sad as a spaniel. We were in his office at U hospital. Clare was in a wheelchair, hospital policy. And necessary. Despite the small army of doctors she'd seen, her sense of balance remained undependable. Sometimes she could walk normally. Sometimes she fell.

"I wish I knew an easy way to tell you this, Clare," Khalid said quietly. "The tests aren't totally conclusive, but our preliminary diagnosis is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis."

"Lou Gehrig's disease," Clare said flatly. It wasn't a question.

"I'm afraid so."

"Afraid of what?" I put in. "What's this Gehrig's disease?"

"A motor disturbance of the nervous system," Khalid explained. "The initial symptoms are weakness in the hands, spasticity or weakness in the legs—"

"—followed by difficulty swallowing and speaking," Clare finished for him. "I've been reading up on my symptoms."

"Okay, fine," I said. "That's what it is. What do we do about it?"

"Very little, I'm afraid," Khalid said. "There are palliative drugs that can make you more comfortable, Miss Landis, but at present there's no cure. Nor any effective treatment. I'm very sorry."

There was a long silence.

"This is crap," I said, flushing, feeling my rage roiling up. I was one second away from punching out Dr. Khalid or the wall. I needed to hit something.

"Danny—"

"No! It really is! This giant frickin' hospital, all these doctors, all this high-tech equipment, and you can't fix somebody who's having a little trouble with her legs?"

"The diagnosis is only preliminary," Dr. Khalid reminded me. "It'll be several months before we can be absolutely certain."

"Why? How will you know?"

"Her symptoms will exacerbate. ALS sometimes progresses very rapidly and I've seen Clare's condition deteriorate in the short time she's been here. The prognosis in such cases is grave."

"No pun intended, I hope," Clare said briskly. "How much time are we talking about here?"

"That's impossible to say with certainty."

"Then give me a ballpark figure, Doctor. I need a number I can understand. Are we talking months? Years?"

"Not years. The normal progression of ALS is from nine to eighteen months," Khalid said. "Your case seems particularly aggressive. You're already having difficulty walking. If the disorder

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continues at its present rate, your other motor functions may be impaired in a matter of months. You're going to need full-time care, Miss Landis. And soon."

"For how long?"

"Six months, perhaps a year. I'm very—"

"Sorry," Clare finished. "You said that already. So am I."

I drove her back to Valhalla myself. No need for an ambulance now. There was no rush. I headed north on I-75 with the woman I loved, a five-hour drive through some of the loveliest scenery on the planet on a sunny August afternoon. The darkest day of my life.

"There are other hospitals," I said.

"University Hospital's one of the best in the country. I checked. And I saw at least a dozen specialists there. They can't all be wrong."

"I want them to be."

"So do I. But I don't have time to waste on wishful thinking. I'm still trying to get my head around all this, Danny. Dammit! I was so close to having it all. Geno, the palace, maybe even a family. It's not fair."

"No, it's not. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Count my blessings, I guess."

"What blessings?"

"Hey, I don't have to worry about getting fat or going gray or having my husband dump me for a waitress."

"How can you joke about this?"

"Because I can't stand whiners and feeling sorry for myself won't help. Okay, it's a lousy break, and some of my dreams won't come true. Reality check. Most people slave away their whole lives and never even catch a glimpse of a dream. At least I came close. Almost close enough to touch it."

"It's still not fair."

"Nope, but there's nothing we can do about that. Solving problems is what we do best. So let's deal with this one. For openers, I don't want anyone else to know about this. It stays between us, Danny. Tell them I'm having back trouble. The wheelchair is only a precaution. Okay?"

"But what about your folks? And Mr. LaRosa?"

"They're my problem, I'll tell them . . . when I'm ready. I need to get everything back on track first. I know that staying at the hospital with me had to cost you. How far behind schedule are we?"

"Forget the damned schedule, Clare. It doesn't matter."

"Wrong, it matters to me. We've worked too long and too hard on this to quit now. I want to see it finished."

"For Geno?" I asked bitterly.

"Of course. But mostly for me. I hate hospitals. I've never had any fun in one. I want to live in my own house, that I helped to

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build. Even if it's only for a little while. I don't want to die in a hospital, Danny."

"You won't," I said. "I promise."

Architects hate redrawing their plans in the middle of a project, so I didn't bother consulting Detroit. Especially since the changes were serious.

The outside stairways were thirty feet across with a shallow, twelve-to-one rise. Ripping out the railings to add a wheelchair ramp trashed the aesthetics of the entry but at least the job wasn't complicated. Carpentry 101.

The interior was tougher. The great hall had broad, curving staircases at either end that rose three stories, lined with hand-crafted wrought-iron bannisters. Installing Stair-Glide chair lifts would have destroyed all of Mafe Rochon's intricate ironwork without really solving the problem.

Clare wouldn't be able to negotiate any kind of ramp for long. She was going to need an elevator.

A small dumbwaiter ran from the kitchen to the upper floors, so we already had an elevator shaft, of sorts. But adapting it to accept a full-size elevator cab meant doubling the interior dimensions. We'd have to completely gut a section of the house we'd just finished. On all three floors. With every foot of it checked and approved by state inspectors.

I never hesitated. Puck was ripping out woodwork to build the new shaft even before I'd finished altering the plans.

None of this came cheap. The elevator, a top-of-the-line Access system, ran nearly thirty thousand. The ramps, remodeling, and installation would easily triple that figure.

The modifications were going to bump the bottom line by almost a hundred grand, and my agreement required that I inform Mr. LaRosa of any overrun above ten thousand. Clare asked me to hold off, so I did. I was breaking my contract, my word, and the law. And I didn't give a damn.

All I cared about was finishing the palace as soon as humanly possible. Not for LaRosa or the money. For Clare.

I ripped into the work like a madman, surly as a gut-shot grizzly. Driven by desperation and anguish. And pain. And rage.

Bullying and begging by turns, I drove the crews even harder. Fourteen-hour shifts became normal. Then sixteen. We started having minor accidents, the mistakes men make when they're tired. There was some grumbling. Talk of a walkout or a slow-down.

I quashed it by firing the first man I heard mouthing off. The others got the message. Like it or not, the palace was still the biggest job any of us had ever seen. Nobody quit. But we were all

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running on fumes, strung out, taut as guy wires. Only a word away from a major blowup.

Ten days after we returned from University Hospital, Clare finally got up the nerve to tell Geno what had happened. I don't know what was said or how he took it. She only told me that Geno and his manager would be flying in on Sunday. She wanted to meet them at the house, privately. I could give the crews the day off.

And she asked one other favor. She wanted to talk with Geno alone in their third-floor bedroom. Could I arrange that?

The elevator had arrived on site but wasn't installed yet. So on that Sunday, I carried Clare up the three flights to her room in my arms.

I was surprised at how little she weighed. And how haggard and drawn she'd become in only two weeks. She looked exhausted.

Dr. Khalid was right; the disease was moving aggressively, wasting her muscles, killing her by inches. And yet to me, at that moment, she'd never been so beautiful. And carrying her up to that bedroom to wait for the man she loved was the hardest goddamn thing I've ever done.

Two limousines arrived an hour later, one with Geno and his manager, Leo Holtzer, the second with one of Leo's assistants, Teddy something, and a woman, slim, blond, and very New York.

LaRosa asked me to show the group around, and went trotting briskly up the stairs, two at a time. I watched him part of the way, envying his effortless grace. Looks, brains, talent, and big bucks to boot. No wonder Clare was in love with him.

I tried to play tour guide for Leo and company but they clearly weren't interested. So I parked them on the back deck in the sunshine with a decent bottle of wine, and left them to chat.

I passed the time strolling the grounds, checking our progress. Staying as far from the master bedroom as I could. I was on the back deck, admiring Rochon's railing welds, when Geno came down. He looked awful—ashen, eyes red. Shaken. He'd obviously been crying. He huddled with Leo a moment, then the two of them waved me over, away from the others.

LaRosa's eyes lanced through me like lasers. "You should have told me!" he hissed.

"Clare asked me not to."

"You work for me, Shea, not for Clare. And you'd better remember that from here on. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Sorry. I know this isn't your fault. But it's such a godawful thing. To see her like that . . ." His voice trailed away. Then he gathered himself, took a deep breath. "The wedding's off, of course, but I want the house finished anyway—"

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"What do you mean, it's off?"

"We agreed it would be pointless now, to say nothing of the legal complications. Besides, marry an invalid? With my lifestyle? How long before I'd resent her? Or she'd resent me?"

"She doesn't have very long."

"Neither do I. I'm only a step or two below the top of the entertainment world, a notch away from being a household name. I can't afford to slow down now, not for anything. Not for anyone. Clare understands that."

"But she loves you."

"And I'll do what I can for her. But derailing my life, wrecking my career, won't help either of us. Or pay the bills. Including yours. You're out of line, Shea. You're my contractor, not my conscience. I didn't authorize those ramps or the elevator. They're coming out of your end. And I want them gone. They're an eyesore."

"But Clare—"

"Won't be living here. Nor will I. Don't you get it? This dream is over. Clare will need full-time care. I'll arrange for that, of course, but it can't be here. I simply can't afford a ten-million-dollar rest home. Finish the house, Shea, make it presentable. But no more changes, no more overruns. I'm putting it on the market and if it sells I can't guarantee the new owners will keep you on. If you have any questions, work them out with Leo. I'm going into town for dinner. Tell Clare I'll see her before I go. But after today, I want her off the property. Permanently. We're done. Clear?"

I was too stunned to answer. LaRosa took that as a reply and strode off. His two assistants trotted after him like lap dogs. Halfway to the limo, the girl took his arm. And it wasn't for balance. Clare was right. When it came to business, Geno was a hardnose. He was cutting his losses and moving on.

Leo noticed my stare.

"Don't worry about him, bucko, you've got grief of your own. You've violated a half-dozen clauses of your contract. I could fire you right now."

"Go ahead."

"Bringing in a new contractor is too much hassle. But you'd better get back on the winning side, and quick."

"Winning side?"

"In the end it'll come down to money. It always does. Clare and Geno have been together five years. She'll probably hire a lawyer, sue for palimony. Maybe she'll ask you to testify about what a cold-hearted bastard Geno is. Don't even think about it. We know all about you two."

"About what?"

"The quiet little dinners, the nights you spent at the Holiday

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Inn together. The way you dumped your responsibilities to hold her hand down in Ann Arbor. If there's a lawsuit—"

"How much do you weigh?" I interrupted.

"Weigh? What the hell does that—"

"Just wondering. I've worked construction all my life, so I do a lot of heavy lifting. You look pretty chunky to me, Leo, but I figure I can throw you all the way to that limo down there. Give or take a bounce. And if you're not gone in the next three seconds, we're gonna find out."

"Are you out of your tree? You can't threaten me—"

"One," I counted. "Two—"

He didn't wait for three. And for a fat city boy, he could move pretty fast.

Clare was exactly where I'd left her, in her wheelchair in the third-floor master bedroom, staring out over the lake.

"Is he gone?"

"They've all gone," I said. "Geno said he'd be back later. To, um . . ." I coughed. "Clare, he's coming to say goodbye."

"He wants to move me to a rest home in New York. Better medical care, not so isolated. Away from all the construction dirt and noise. Leo's already made the arrangements. Funny, making arrangements used to be my job."

"Maybe it's the right thing to do."

"No, not for me. I feel alive here. I love the chaos and the cursing and the sawdust in the air. It smells like the future. Like hope. And Geno still needs this palace, this . . . sanctuary, whether he knows it or not. I can tell he's been worrying himself sick over me. He looks peaked. Probably hasn't been eating right. Don't you think he looked thin?"

"Clare, don't ask what I think of Geno LaRosa. You don't want to know."

"Poor Danny," she said with a wan smile. "Don't worry, Geno's much too decent to throw me out of here. In the end he'll do the right thing for me and this house. He just needs a little time to think. He'll change his mind. You'll see."

"Maybe you're right. Shall I take you downstairs?"

"No, I'd rather wait for Geno here."

"It'll be dark soon, Clare. There's no electricity on this floor."

"Then leave me some candles. These days I look better by candlelight anyway. But I'd like to wait alone, if you don't mind, Danny. I've got some thinking to do."

"Whatever you say. I'll find some candles, then I'll leave you two alone to talk. I'll stop by later in case you need a ride to town."

"Thanks. Just don't come blundering into our bedroom again, okay?"

"Not a chance. I'm still blushing from the last time."

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"Yeah, right. Pervert." She laughed, and so did I. Couldn't help it. Clare's laugh is as contagious as the flu. I'd almost forgotten how fine it was. Hadn't heard it lately.

I went home, fed my dogs, and sat with my dad awhile. Avoiding the palace. Partly out of jealousy. If Geno and Clare were making up or making out, I didn't want to know about it.

But it was partly out of fear as well. I really couldn't afford to lose this job. I desperately needed the work and the money. So I didn't want to see Geno LaRosa again. I might be tempted to try a little magic on him. Like rearranging his face.

Dusk was settling over the hills when I drove back to the site. It was after seven, but Geno's limo was still there. No driver in sight, he must have come alone. I could see candlelight flickering in the master bedroom. So they were still up there. Together. Damn.

I switched on my truck radio and settled in to wait. A month's worth of exhaustion rolled over me like a dark wave, carrying me down and down . . .

When I woke it was full dark. After ten. No light was showing in the house now. But Geno's limo hadn't moved.

I wasn't sure what to make of that.

The limo was long gone the next morning when the crews clocked in. At eleven, I called an early lunch-break meeting in the great room. Standing a few steps up the staircase, I explained the change in our situation to the men. Told them the house was up for sale and we could be replaced without notice.

"If anyone wants to bail out, all I ask is a couple of days to find a replacement. You can draw your wages at the end of the week, no hard feelings. Any takers?"

No one raised a hand.

"Hell," Puck said, "we've already spent more time in this place than Mr. New York Big Shot. Screw 'im if he wants to sell. I've never worked on a frickin' mansion before, probably never will again. I want to see this one finished, slicked up and shinin' in the sun."

Nods and murmurs ran through the group. They'd stick. And I had to swallow a lump in my throat. These were good men, skilled craftsmen, hard workers, every one. I'd pushed them to the max and beyond but they still wouldn't quit. They deserved better luck.

"Yo, Danny," Mafe Rochon called. "This sudden change of heart Mr. LaRosa had—you don't suppose he's mad 'cause he found out you been bangin' his girlfriend, do ya?"

I turned away, shrugging off the jibe. Letting it pass. Clamping the lid on my anger. Mafe was half buzzed, as usual, just running his mouth. It didn't mean anything and I couldn't afford any trouble now.

Let it go.

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Let it go, let it go. And I did! Whirling, I vaulted the railing, tackling Mafe Rochon from the stairway, hitting him chest high, pulling him down. Cursing, we wrestled around on the floor until Mafe got a boot in my chest and kicked me off halfway across the room.

Scrambling to our feet, we lit into each other. No science, no skill, hammering away like hockey players, trying to land one monster punch!

Puck tried to pull us apart, caught a wild backhand that bloodied his nose and sat him down hard, gagging. No one else stepped in. They formed a rough ring around us instead and let us go at it. This had been coming on for a while. Get the hell out of the way, boys! Let 'er rip!

I'd jumped Mafe in a red-eyed fury. It passed the first time he grazed me with a right cross. Drunk or sober, Rochon had an ironworker's power in his fists. If I couldn't finish him fast, he'd pound me down and stomp me into dog meat.

Ducking under his guard, I drove a hard left hook into his beer belly, following with an overhand right that opened a gash under his eye. He didn't even blink. Countered with an elbow to the throat that nearly broke my jaw!

We'd both drawn blood now. And tasted our own. Panting, sparring cautiously, we circled each other, glaring like pit bulls, looking for an opening.

"All right, that's enough!" somebody yelled. "Break it up, you two."

If Mafe heard, he gave no sign. Instead he lowered his head and rushed me. Bulling into my chest, he smashed me into the wall of fight fans like a pile driver, sending a half-dozen men sprawling in a wild tangle. Bystanders scrambled to get out of the way as Mafe and I grappled again.

Somebody grabbed my arm from behind. Twisting free, I whirled, fist cocked—and found myself facing a cop. A big cop. In uniform. With his riot baton raised, ready to open my skull.

Another officer prodded Mafe back with his night stick as a half-dozen policemen surrounded the crowd. Carrying shotguns.

"Whoa up," I said, opening my hands, backing away. "I'm cool. What's all this?"

"I could ask you the same thing, sport. What the hell is this supposed to be? A fight club?"

"No. It's . . . just a little lunch-hour boxing match that got out of hand."

"Didn't look much like boxing to me."

"So maybe we're not very good." I lowered my hands. "What are you guys doing here? I know the neighbors didn't complain. We don't have any."

"I'm Sergeant Macafee, Michigan State Police. I'm looking for the owner, a Mr. Geno LaRosa. Who's in charge here?"

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"That would be me. I'm the contractor, Dan Shea. Mr. LaRosa isn't here."

"I told you he'd say that," Leo Holtzer said, pushing through the crowd.

"Cool off, Mr. Holtzer," Macafee said, "I'll handle this. When did you see LaRosa last, Mr. Shea?"

"He was here last night. Had a long talk with his fiancée, Clare Landis."

"What time did he leave?"

"I . . . can't say for sure. I didn't actually see him. His car was here when I came by to give Miss Landis a ride back to town. That would have been seven, seven-thirty. I didn't want to interrupt them, so I waited. Must have nodded off. When I woke up, the limo was gone. I drove Clare into town, went home. That's all I can tell you."

"He's lying!"

"Put a cork in it, Holtzer! I won't tell you again. Can anybody vouch for your story, Mr. Shea?"

"I don't know. Clare, I guess."

"Damned right she will," Leo spat. "They're in it together!"

"In what together? What the hell's going on?"

"Mr. LaRosa is missing," Macafee said, reading my face. "He was supposed to be in Las Vegas last night. Didn't show. We found his car at the county airport. His private plane is still parked on the apron. He obviously never left, but nobody seems to know where he is."

"I don't know anything about that, but I can tell you he's not here."

"Maybe not, but we can't just take your word for it. You men! I want you all to stay right where you are, in the middle of this room. Don't talk to each other and don't move around. Anyone who does is a collar. Understood?"

"Twenty-five grand!" Leo shouted. "Twenty-five thousand dollars to any man who can help us locate Geno LaRosa! I know he's here! I know Shea did him harm. What do you say?"

"Dammit, Holtzer—" Macafee began.

"Wait a minute," Mafe Rochon said. "There's a fresh patch of cement in the basement. It wasn't there Saturday when we quit."

"What about that, Shea?" Macafee asked.

"Sure there's fresh cement down there." I shrugged. "This is a construction site, Sarge. I realigned a drain Sunday. So what?"

"So we'll search the building first," Macafee said. "Then you can show me that new drain."

A half-dozen cops and two police dogs went through the house, top to bottom. It was a thorough search but it didn't take long. With so many walls unfinished you could see through most of the building end to end. Couldn't hide a cat in it.

One dog freaked at some blood spots near the staircase but it

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was fresh, from Puck's broken nose. They didn't find anything else. Leaving four men to watch my crew, Macafee had Rochon lead us down to the basement. It was a shambles. We'd been storing our scrap lumber down here and the cops had ripped the stacks apart. They'd even torn open the crates containing the bathtubs and appliances, the elevator cab and its motor.

"Jeez, Macafee, you clowns have cost me a month's work down here," I griped. "Who's gonna pay for this mess?"

"That's not your problem," Leo snapped. "You're fired, Shea. And you're going to jail!"

"The new concrete's over here," Mafe said, pointing to a patch about six feet by four. Grave size.

"The drains come down the north wall and run through there," I pointed out. "They were misaligned. I straightened them up."

"Maybe." Macafee nodded. "I want to see what's under there anyway. Bust it up."

"You bust it up, pal. Fatso here just fired me."

"I'll break it up," Rochon said, grabbing a sledgehammer. "Hell, for twenty-five thou I'd bust up my daddy in the town square."

"You'd have to ask your mama first. To find out who he was."

"Damn you, Danny!" Mafe lunged at me with the hammer.

Macafee blocked his path, pointing toward the fresh cement. "Back off, Rochon. Take it out on the cement."

Mafe set to work with a will. Glowering at me between blows, he pulverized the concrete, raising a cloud of acrid dust, pelting us all with stone chips. At the bottom he found an eight-inch drainpipe. Neatly aligned. Nothing else. They even brought the dogs down for a sniff. The German shepherds wrinkled their noses at the bitter stench of quick-dry cement and turned away, tails drooping. They looked almost as disappointed as Mafe.

"If you're done screwing around down here, Sergeant, I need to get my men back to work," I said. "It's a big property, though. Twenty-five hundred acres of piney woods, swamps, and sinkholes. If you boys plan on searching it, you'd best get started. Might take awhile."

Macafee scanned my face.

"You seem awfully certain we won't find him, Mr. Shea. Why is that? Because you know where he is?"

"Nope."

"But you're not surprised he's missing?"

"The guy came to his dream house yesterday and found out his fiancée is dying. Maybe he went off by himself to think things through. Wouldn't you?"

"I might," Macafee admitted. "But I wouldn't disappear without a trace."

"That's because you're a cop. I put up buildings, you chase

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crooks. Geno LaRosa makes elephants and skyscrapers disappear. Making himself disappear would be kid stuff. I expect he'll turn up again when he wants to."

"You're saying this is a publicity stunt?" Macafee asked.

"I sure hope so. The man pays my wages."

"He's lying!" Leo ranted, red-faced with fury. "I want him arrested."

"For what?" Macafee asked. "He's right. We aren't certain there's actually been a crime. And it's at least possible this is some kind of stunt."

"A stunt? In this two-bit backwater? Are you out of your mind? I want this property searched! Every inch of it!"

"That's not possible," Macafee said. "Not today, anyway. It'd take an army to search two thousand acres. I don't have the authority to order it just because your boss missed a nightclub date. We're done here. For now."

"Then I order you to escort Shea and his men off this property! They're fired! All of them."

"You can't fire us, Leo. My contract is with Geno LaRosa, not you. He told me to finish this house by Christmas and you've already cost us half a day. If I were you, I'd leave with these officers. Construction sites are dangerous places. Especially for civilians."

Leo glanced around at the hard-eyed crew surrounding him and swallowed. "All right. I'll go. But you won't get away with this, Shea. Geno's not just a performer, he's an industry, a multinational corporation. Television, DVDs, computer games. I'll have the studio put up a million-dollar reward. Geno's fans will rip this dump apart looking for him. I'll have studio attorneys bury you in lawsuits. You'll never finish this job or any other. Before I'm through, you'll be building outhouses in prison. You're finished!" He turned and stalked out. Macafee and his men went with him.

"Another satisfied customer," Puck said. "Now what?"

"Back to work, that's why we're here. We've got a contract, remember?"

"What about Holtzer? If he was serious about that reward, he could cause real problems. We can't work and guard this place at the same time."

"I know. The plans called for a security fence after the house is finished. We'll just have to build it now, that's all. Just in case."

"Okay." Puck nodded. "I'll see to it."

"What about me?" Mafe Rochon asked sourly. "Have I got a job or not?"

"That depends. I don't have time to fight you, Mafe. Besides, you hit too damn hard. You gonna give me any more problems?"

"Nah." He grinned, massaging the mouse under his eye. "I figure

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with the cops and that Holtzer fella you got trouble enough, Danny. I'd kinda like to stick around. See how it all turns out."

"All right, then. We're burnin' daylight, guys. Let's roll."

Puck's fence wasn't pretty. Chain-link, ten feet high, topped with razor wire. The original plans called for fieldstone pillars and wrought-iron spikes. We could install them after we finished the main house. Assuming we got the chance.

Reporters and curiosity seekers started coming by in a steady stream, blowing their horns outside the gate, gawking, taking pictures.

The fence kept them at bay, but it wouldn't for long. The tabloids were already printing rumors—SUPERSTAR MAGICIAN MURDERED?; MAGIC MAN GENO'S MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE!—and I knew that five minutes after Leo posted his big-buck reward, the stampede would be on. Fence or no fence, they would bury us.

But I couldn't let myself worry about it. No time. I added a third shift, working around the clock now, twenty-four/seven. I was on the job for almost every minute of it, storming around like a demon, catching catnaps when I could. But in my heart I knew I was only killing time. Trying not to think. Waiting for the ax to fall.

A few days later, it finally came down. Clare called me at the site. We hadn't talked since the Sunday Geno vanished. She'd been ill, holed up in the Holiday Inn, avoiding reporters. She said Leo Holtzer and the studio lawyers were flying in that night for a meeting. I had to be there or they could fire me without a hearing.

Hell, who were we kidding? They were going to fire me anyway. Holtzer would see to that. I thought about ducking it, just to spite him. This would be his big moment. Payback time. Nothing I could say would change anything.

I went anyway. No choice. I couldn't leave Clare to face the wolves alone.

But as I drove out of the gate that night, I stopped a moment for one final look.

Even unfinished, with half the windows installed, the mansion was magnificent. My palace in the pines. We were so close. Two more months and . . . But I wasn't going to get those months. Geno was right. This dream was over.

Two security goons posted at the Holiday Inn conference-room door frisked me and checked my identification before letting me pass.

Inside, Leo was sitting at the conference table flanked by a half-dozen guys in suits. I scarcely noticed them. All I could see was Clare.

She was in her wheelchair, alone, near the head of the table. She

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looked terrible. Gaunt, hopeless. She didn't even look up when I walked in.

"Mr. Shea?" The suit beside Leo rose. "I'm Abel Reisch, senior corporate counsel for OmniTel Studios. Take a seat, please." He didn't offer to shake hands. Neither did I. Reisch was tall, hawk-faced, graying at the temples. He introduced the other guys at the table, all corporate officers with OmniTel. I didn't catch their names. Leo was gloating like a schoolyard bully. I let it pass. Mafe Rochon was right. I had troubles enough.

"This isn't a formal hearing, Mr. Shea," Reisch said. "It's strictly a private, corporate inquiry. But it will be recorded, and considering the gravity of the situation, perhaps you'd prefer to have an attorney present?"

"No."

"As you wish." One of the suits placed a laptop on the table and set it to Record. Reisch stated his name, the date, identified the rest of us, and noted that I'd declined a lawyer.

"The tabloids are full of innuendos that imply you were involved in the death or disappearance of Geno LaRosa, Mr. Shea. Leo here believes it, too. For the record, Mr. Shea, did you kill Geno LaRosa?"

I blinked. "Wow, you don't kid around, do you? No, I didn't kill Geno and I have no idea where he is."

"What did you expect him to say?" Leo snapped.

"You told the police his disappearance might be deliberate?" Reisch continued, ignoring the interruption.

"I only said it was possible. He got some very bad news that day about Miss Landis. Maybe he wanted to drop out, think things over."

"And how do you think he might have accomplished this?"

"No idea. I'm a contractor. Turning lumber into houses is as magical as I get. You people know more about this sort of thing than I do."

"Unfortunately, we don't. Which is the purpose of this meeting. When did you see Mr. LaRosa last?"

"That Sunday. The day he disappeared."

"And did he give you any indication of his intentions?"

"We only talked about the house. He said he wanted it finished. Asked me to speed things up, in fact."

"Because he intended to sell it and fire you!" Leo spat.

"Is that true?" Reisch asked.

"Mr. LaRosa didn't say anything like that to me. Leo brought it up after the police tore the place apart looking for Geno."

"The state police have assured me it was a thorough search. Would you agree?"

"They had search dogs and went through the house top to bottom. Even smashed up some of the concrete in the basement. Looked pretty darn thorough to me."

"But they didn't search the entire property, did they?" Reisch

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pressed. "Twenty-five hundred acres of wilderness. Do you think the police should search the property, Mr. Shea?"

"Where they search is their business."

"So you'd have no objection?" His eyes were locked on mine, probing my thoughts like radar.

"No, why should I?"

"Miss Landis? Would you have any objections to the police searching the grounds?"

"No." Clare's voice was barely a whisper.

"Very well, we're agreed. I'll ask the state police to do a complete search of the grounds, the airfield, and anywhere else they think appropriate. OmniTel will cover any and all expenses. Personally, I doubt that they'll find anything. Geno was far too good an illusionist to leave any traces."

"What?" Leo asked, dumbfounded. "What are you saying?"

"That OmniTel's public position will essentially be a question mark. We don't know where Geno LaRosa is, or what happened to him. But privately, off the record, we'll admit that after a thorough investigation, we tend to agree with Mr. Shea. That Geno vanished deliberately, as the ultimate expression of his art. And that in time he will return. When he chooses to."

"Have you lost your mind, Abel?" Leo blurted. "You can't be serious!"

"Leo, I've tolerated your outbursts to this point because of your long association with Geno. But it's time for a reality check. Mr. LaRosa has been a valued employee of OmniTel for years—"

"You're damned right! He earned millions for you!"

"And he will continue to do so," Reisch went on. "We're getting offers for movies about his life, the networks want to rerun his cable TV specials. With DVDs, action toys, video games, advertising tie-ins, the profit potential is enormous."

"And you're willing to let Shea get away with murder? Just to make a few bucks?"

"Turn that off!" Reisch snapped at the exec with the laptop. "You don't get it, Leo. Dead, Geno is just another victim. A few minutes of airtime on the six o'clock news, then oblivion. But missing? Vanished? Geno becomes immortal, a legend greater than Houdini. Or Jimmy Hoffa."

"But he's dead! They killed him, I'm sure of it!"

"I'd be careful about making unfounded allegations, Leo. Clare is in delicate health and the corporation will react aggressively to any threats. Especially since you have no legal standing in the matter."

"No standing? I'm Geno's agent, for God's sake!"

"If he's dead, you no longer have a client, Leo. And if you go to the press, we'll sue you for defamation and cut off your royalties. Be reasonable. As long as Geno remains . . . missing, you'll con-

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tinue to receive your full percentage of his earnings. But you really can't afford a war with OmniTel. Take a walk, cool off. I'll meet you in the bar later. We'll work something out."

Holtzer glanced down the table looking for allies. Found only cold stares. He started to argue, then shook his head. And stalked out.

One of the execs glanced a question at Reisch.

"Don't worry, Leo's a bright fella," Reisch said. "He'll come around. And you, Mr. Shea? Do you have any . . . questions?"

"Mr. Reisch, all I want is to finish Mr. LaRosa's house as planned. Will I be able to do that?"

"Of course. We can make it a centerpiece. The magician's mysterious mansion, brooding by the lakeshore, waiting for his return. I do have a small favor to ask, though."

"What favor?"

"As she's in failing health, Clare would like to move into the house as soon as possible. A room or two will suffice. Can you arrange that, Mr. Shea?"

"Of course. No problem."

"Good." Reisch smiled. "I like your attitude, Mr. Shea. We're going to get along famously. From now on, you just concentrate on your work. If anyone bothers you—police, reporters, anyone at all—just refer them to me. And I'll make them . . . disappear."

"Like magic?" I asked.

"Exactly."

And that was it. Almost.

As the meeting broke up, Reisch took me aside, away from the others. "One other small matter, Mr. Shea. If by chance you happen to . . . stumble across any remains? Bury them. Deep. You wouldn't want to ruin Geno's chance for immortality. Would you?"

And he smiled. And shook my hand.

Mr. Reisch proved as good as his word. Reporters had been stopping by my house, bugging my father. I called Abel Reisch's office. End of story. They never came back.

We finished the main house ahead of schedule in early December. And earned a whopping bonus from OmniTel. A very merry Christmas present for the crews. And for me.

Clare lives there now, in the third-story bedroom. But it's not the dream home she envisioned. It's a prison. From her window she can see the fence, and the barbed wire. And even armed guards.

They're necessary. Ever since Geno vanished, wackos from all over the planet have been finding their way to the mansion.

They linger outside the gates like zombies. Some burn candles. Some sing. Some just stare.

Waiting.

As Clare does. She's wheelchair-bound now. Speaks with diffi-

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culty. Needs help to eat. When death finally comes, it will be a blessing for her. A release.

There are worse things than death.

Watching the woman I love dying by inches every day. Knowing she loved another man so much she'd rather see him dead than let him go.

I found Geno at the bottom of the elevator shaft that night. I don't know how she did it. Perhaps she pushed him. Or just led him to the elevator door, and in the candlelight, he assumed . . .

I don't want to know. I don't care.

I only knew that I couldn't let her die in a hospital. Or in a cell. But even on two thousand acres, you can't hide a body anymore. With all the high-tech gear police have nowadays, I knew they'd find it.

If there was a body to find.

I have a burn scar on my arm. From a torch. And I was lucky. Because at three thousand degrees, flesh doesn't burn. It vaporizes.

But not right away. Even with Rochon's torch set at the maximum, it took hours. Hours. And the sizzling and the ghastly stench . . .

In the end, only a fine gray ash remained. Like cement dust.

The police actually found Geno when they broke up that floor. They just didn't recognize him.

But I didn't get away with anything. Not really. The horror of that night haunts me. It stains my soul. I can't sleep. Can't eat.

I think Clare knows. When they searched the basement and found nothing, she must have guessed. We've never spoken of it.

But in a way, I suppose we each got what we wanted. Or a part of it.

I'm financially set, and the publicity about the palace has attracted more clients than I can handle.

Clare won't die in a hospital. She'll live out her days in that house. With the man she loved. And as her days grow short, she spends them in the past. Dreaming of happier times. With him. But in the end, only Geno got it all. He wanted fame and he's a legend now. Immortal. Greater than Houdini.

And his magnificent house turned out exactly as he planned. A massive log castle that truly belongs where it is.

Built of native trees and stones from the fields around it, the mansion looks as if it's been there for centuries and will stand a thousand years after we're gone.

I built it. But it was Geno's dream. His palace in the pines.

He'll always be a part of it now.

And so will Clare.

And so will I. ●

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GAUDÍ NIGHT

by Robert Barnard

It's honor upon honor for England's Robert Barnard, who is shortly to receive the Diamond Dagger Award, for lifetime achievement, from the British Crime Writers' Association and has also just been nominated for an Agatha Award by the Malice Domestic Convention. The latter distinction attaches to a story Mr. Barnard had published in *EQMM* in June 2002, entitled "Dognapped." We congratulate him on both events. (Agatha winners will be determined by voting at the upcoming convention.) ¶

"Now, girls," came the penetrating voice from behind the little group, "here is the shop and the point of entry. Try to remember always to be aware of where I and Miss Hesketh are, or Señora Fides here. If you should lose sight of us, remember to *keep together.* We would never find you all if you split up!"

At the barrier, Miss Hesketh proffered the group ticket, then she and Miss Davenport led the way out of the shop, through the entrance bar, and into the open area before the Temple of the Holy Family. Down to their left was the museum. Round to the right was the flight of steps to the street and the best viewing area for the incredible facade.

"I *think,*" said Vera Davenport, "we must give the museum a miss this time. It's the church that is important, aren't I right, señora?" The dark little lady in the old-fashioned coat and dress nodded. "So we will use all the time between now and closing time to view the church itself, with Señora Fides's expert help. She is a native of Barcelona, and therefore knows well this wonderful place, the Sagrada Familia."

The little group, momentarily solemn, moved towards the steps, and to their first view of Gaudí's lifework. The girls, after nearly a minute of gazing and disentangling the interleaved mass of decoration, began exclaiming delightedly.

"Is that a snake?"

"I think it's a lizard. Isn't he funny poking through the leaves?"

"Look, there's a banana. And an apple."

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"I think it's an orange."

"If it's the Garden of Eden it's an apple, stupid."

Señora Fides's pinched, solemn face opened up, and she looked at the girls with delight. She had a native Catalan's pride in the Holy Family Church, now in its hundred and twentieth year of construction.

Gemma Hesketh and Vera Davenport, standing aside from the group, were slower in their reactions. At least they were slower, much slower, in expressing delight. They had a teacher's preference for facial impassivity. As always, it was Miss Davenport, the older and the more opinionated, who spoke first.

"Well, I knew it was ornate, but . . ."

"It's a bit over the top, isn't it?" returned Miss Hesketh.

"A bit? Way, way, million miles over it. If Walt Disney had founded a religious sect—and there's no reason why he shouldn't have, since every second American seems to do just that—his cathedral would look exactly like this."

"It is a bit *Jungle Book,*" agreed Gemma Hesketh.

"It's so extra*or*dinary. I mean, look at those sculpted groups—Madonna and Child, wise men, Saint Elizabeth getting the good news—they're pure religious gift shop. Banal to say the least. And then around them!—" she shivered—"all that vege*ta*tion, creeping, intertwining, imprisoning. It *is* like a jungle: one that takes hold of you and won't let you go. It's unnerving!"

A historian of public taste in art and architecture (particularly one specialising in the more way-out reaches of that taste) would have had a field day contrasting the delight of the girls in the massively overabundant nature that dominated the facade and the spires of the Sagrada Familia and the uneasy, almost horrified reactions of their schoolmistresses. The girls, having exhausted the central tableau, moved over to the facade of the south aisle.

The Girls of the Poor Clares (Scunthorpe) had been founded in the eighteen eighties to educate the daughters of Catholics. Then, the teachers had been mainly the Poor Clares themselves—indeed, in the early years exclusively so, because after all it was only girls who were being educated. Times had changed. The Poor Clares had become thin on the ground, as very few girls were so inspired by their teachers' lives and dedication to become Poor Clares themselves. Parents' requirements for their daughters' education became more stringent as Catholic girls began to get ambitions that did not centre exclusively on Catholic motherhood. First lay women, then lay men were recruited to strengthen the academic side of the school's teaching. For many years now the upper-school teaching had been exclusively lay. The only thing the staff had in common with the Poor Clares was poverty.

"It's not just jungle greenery," resumed Vera Davenport. "All the

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surface seems pitted with blotches, eruptions, pustules. It's as if the stone has been afflicted with some form of skin disease. It's all horribly reminiscent of Gormengast. Perhaps we could call the style Gormenghastly."

"Or its ecclesiastical equivalent: Gormengaudí," contributed Miss Hesketh.

They tried to keep their voices low and their demeanour seemly. Vera Davenport succeeded in the first aim, but failed in the second. The eyes of Señora Fides flicked frequently in her direction, and registered her lack of reverence for the pride of Catalan Catholicism.

"Let's go forward to view the nave, girls," said Miss Davenport in her normal, commanding tones. "Care must be taken. As you know, work is still very much in progress. . . . Oh! I hadn't quite expected a building site!"

She said the words, in an attempt at ingratiation, to Señora Fides. The latter shrugged, unsmiling.

"The work continues. It will be many years before it is finished."

"I think we can all see that."

Vera Davenport moved away again with Miss Hesketh. Together they viewed the nave and the north aisle. Men were everywhere: cutting stone, heaving beams, pouring plaster over moulds, fixing coloured glass into lead frames. It was like a super-busy Victorian painting depicting honest toil.

"You would have thought, after a hundred and twenty years, that some part of the church might have been completed for worship, wouldn't you?" Vera whispered. "That does seem to be carrying *'mañana'* a bit far."

"It's awe-inspiring, in a way," said Gemma. "Think of it: Some of these men working here now could be the great-grandsons of men who started the work in eighteen eighty-two."

"It's even more awe-inspiring to think that in another hundred and twenty years these men's great-grandsons could be working here and it still won't be finished," said Vera Davenport. "By then, Spain probably won't even be a Christian country. They'll just be doing it for the tourist trade—something for Japanese cameras to snap."

The School of the Poor Clares employed teachers who were not of the Catholic faith, merely requiring them to be tactful and discreet. Miss Davenport's position was different to theirs, however. She had been born a Catholic, and had resumed the observances of her faith when she got the position of Senior English Mistress at the school. The headmistress often wished she had not, for her scepticism somehow seeped out. She certainly wouldn't have chosen Miss Davenport as one of the leaders of the fourth year's annual excursion to one of the Mediterranean centres of the

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Catholic faith. She had been chosen only because there was no choice: The teachers in the party had to pay fifty percent of their expenses. Only the unmarried Misses Davenport and Hesketh could (just) afford to go.

"Let us go and see the great building from the back," said Señora Fides. "Come—this way."

She led the party down a narrow passageway fenced off at the south side of the nave, with people all the time crowding them as they came in the opposite direction from back to front.

"How lucky we are to have Señora Fee-dess!" said Miss Davenport brightly to one of her pupils. "A true Catalanian, and with a connection with the school."

"What was her connection, Miss Davenport?" asked the girl.

"I think she was married to someone," said Miss Davenport vaguely. "A teacher, or something like that. It accounts for her excellent English."

"I suppose marriage is the best possible way to learn a foreign language," said Cecilia, looking with languorous eyes at a stalwart young stonecutter in the nave. He looked back, stony as his material, perhaps from works policy, perhaps from personal inclination.

At the back of the church was the secondary entrance, and the gift shop. Here the girls went mad with an enthusiasm they had not shown in the equivalent part of the Maritime Museum earlier in the day. Everything was exclaimed over: plaster models of Gaudí's fantastic building, items of reproduced statuary from the Holy Family to lizards and foxes, stencilled T-shirts with holy slogans, jigsaw puzzles, and racks of postcards.

"Look at this wonderful one of the front, all spotlit," said Cecilia. "I'll send it to my granny."

"Here's it from the air. Doesn't it look magnificent!"

"Where's my lizard? Where's my lovely lizard? They have a model of it, but I can't afford that. They must have a postcard of my lizard."

"They can't have cards of everything," explained Señora Fides. "Think how rich it is in sculpture. Look, here's one of a snake."

"Oh, I don't think I could send anyone a *snake,*" said Cecilia, with a precocious sense of *comme il faut.*

"These are for my scrapbook of monstrosities," whispered Miss Davenport to Miss Hesketh, "already crammed with postcards from the shrine of Fatima last year. Look—I've chosen the ones that capture the excesses and vulgarity of the place. The floodlit one has a particular ripeness, don't you think?"

"Undoubtedly. I've bought one, too. Like Cecilia, I'm going to send it to my granny."

"Yes—grannies usually have a rich fund of vulgarity, don't they? I suppose you get more unashamed as eternity looms. Oh dear—

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now I've got six, and they're forty pesetas each. I didn't intend to contribute more than one hundred pesetas to the sacred work."

"Grit your teeth," advised Gemma Hesketh. "It will hardly pay for one millionth part of one of those pustules that blight the stone."

And so, clutching their large and small plastic bags full of T-shirts and gilt-lettered ballpoint pens and cuddly toy animals and models for the family mantelpiece, the girls streamed out the back entrance and down the steps to their coach, laughing, chatting, holding hands, and linking arms, Señora Fides in the middle of them, as happy as anyone.

The two teachers watched them for a minute from the top of the steps.

"Strange how happy they are," said Miss Davenport. "Perhaps this is a place for the innocent, unfledged mind."

"News to me that they're innocent," said Miss Hesketh. "They're fifteen, for heaven's sake. That's at least eighteen in our teenage days."

"True," said Vera Davenport, and they walked down to the coach.

Señora Fides accompanied them back to the Conde Guell guesthouse, an establishment not far from the famous Parc Guell, as the señora informed them from the front of the bus. She was very informative, and she was to give a little talk to the girls after supper about the Sagrada Familia, since it was impossible to convey any information or appreciation with stonecutters and pickaxes working a few feet away. The party enjoyed a meal of gazpacho soup followed by meatballs in a cuttlefish sauce. Miss Hesketh and Miss Davenport had debated whether they needed to stay for the little lecture, but their inclination to scuttle off and find a cosy bar was dampened by the fact that someone had to see the girls safely to bed, and they were aware that they had not endeared themselves to Señora Fides, who in any case would presumably be disappearing after the lecture to whatever home—flat, house, palace—she had in Barcelona. With a sigh they resigned themselves to sticking it out.

It was a practised performance the señora gave. She had clearly done the spiel often to other school parties, and she had slides, a model, and the history of the place off pat. She told them of all the stages by which the building had reached its present state of noncompletion, and she saw no reason, she said, to apologise for the length of time the building had taken.

"Think of your own great cathedrals—Lincoln, Salisbury, Exeter. Do you think they were built in twenty, thirty, forty years? Not at all. It took centuries before they attained their present form. My late husband used to say that really great buildings are not *built,* they *evolve.* So it is with the Sagrada Familia. What if it does take another hundred and twenty years to complete?" Here her eyes

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fixed themselves on the two teachers sitting on chairs by the door. "It will have evolved, it will have changed to meet the changing needs of the people of Barcelona, but it will bear witness to the unchanging nature of our beliefs. When the great Gaudí was vouchsafed his great vision, Spain was a country rich with faith—with the courage to bear witness to that faith. Perhaps one day in the future we can recapture that splendid, burning mood."

She turned away from the teachers, as if they were worth no more of her eloquence, and concentrated her burning intensity on the twenty-three adolescent girls whose attention had become rapt as the spectacle of religious passion was—unusually—paraded before their eyes.

"If we are to recapture that great faith, that burning devotion, young people like you need first to *reject.* Only when you have rejected the ways of today can you return to the clear vision of yesterday. You have to reject cynicism, the sneering at central tenets of our faith, the sweeping aside of truths vouchsafed for over the centuries. There will be those around you who act on the belief that 'everything exists, nothing has value.' You have to extirpate that from your thinking! Kick modern cynicism into the gutter."

"Strong stuff!" whispered Vera Davenport.

"Sounds like the sort of crap they probably peddled in Irish schools in the nineteen fifties," said Gemma Hesketh.

"Good vocabulary, though."

"Then, only then," the voice resumed, "can you swim through the darkness that surrounds you and out into the light—the light of that sweet, clear, incandescent faith of Gaudí and his fellow workers and believers, whose wonderful conception the Holy Family Church was. Today you delighted in the richness and humanity of it all: When you are grown up, you will see those as an expression of a rich Catholic faith, the inheritance of us all from medieval times, when our belief stood where it belongs, at the centre of our lives. Thank you, girls."

There was warm applause—warmer than the two teachers had ever heard for a visiting speaker.

"Who says women will never become priests in the Catholic Church?" said Miss Davenport.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's a question of *'Don't* give me the Old Time Religion!'" said Miss Hesketh. "It gives me the gripes. I'm off for a snifter or two in my room, then it's beddy-byes."

And she slipped out among the girls also disappearing to their rooms. Leaving Miss Davenport, as excursion leader, to thank the speaker.

"*What* a splendid talk!" she exclaimed, as if possessed of an exalted enthusiasm. "And how *wonderfully* put across. Perfectly adapted to young minds. I think the girls' reaction will have told

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you what an impression you made. I never thought to hear E.M. Forster quoted in a lecture on the Sagrada Familia, Señora Fides."

"Not 'Fee-dess,' " said the señora. " 'Fidz,' to rhyme with 'brides.' My husband was English, an old Lancashire Catholic family."

"Of course he was. And he was a teacher at our very school, wasn't he?"

"Oh yes."

"What did he teach—history?"

"No, he taught English."

Conscious that she might have been expected to know the name of one of her predecessors, Miss Davenport thought it was too late to try to cover up.

"Of course, I should have realised from the Forster quote."

"I could read English novels before I married my late husband," said Señora Fides, who clearly had no appetite for being condescended to. "He taught me to understand them more deeply, to penetrate to their underlying mysteries. As he did with my religion. He also taught the Faith to the girls in school."

The Faith! thought Vera. How quaint! Nowadays they taught something called World Religions.

"You must be glad to be back living in a Catholic country," she said, meaning well. Señora Fides shrugged dismissively.

"Catholic country? What is a Catholic country these days? Everywhere there is backsliding and apostasy. Everywhere the Faith is neglected or spurned. My husband was one of the first to discover this. It broke his heart. The plight of the children of the Poor Clares School broke his heart."

Vera was about to say that so far as she could see the girls of the Poor Clares School didn't have any "plight" to speak of, but she suddenly saw that Señora Fides had taken from the breadboard on the table a stumpy, serrated knife. She stood there, holding it in her right hand. Surely a *bread* knife couldn't? . . . But Vera's eye, enchained to the spectacle, saw that it was not thin and flexible, but a solid, sharp piece of steel.

"Well, it's been *most* interesting—" she said.

"It was the pride and joy of his life, teaching the little ones their Faith, then broadening and strengthening it as they grew up and progressed through the school. The pride of his life! And then they came to him, and do you know what they said?"

Vera Davenport could guess. It was said often enough to teachers who were hopelessly out of date. But she shook her head. If only the woman would drop the knife! If only the last girl out hadn't closed the door behind her.

"Er, no . . . What did they say?"

"They said his teaching hadn't kept pace with changes in education practice. They said it was a bit too close to 'indoctrination,'

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and they had to have something more modern and broad-minded. How could they say that? What my husband was teaching was our Faith, the doctrines we live by."

"Yes, but faith does change, doesn't it?" said Vera as gently as she knew how. "The sixteenth-century Church of the Counter Reformation was not the same as the sixth-century Church."

"Yes! The same as far as the Faith was concerned. The Faith of St. Peter, handed down, pure and immaculate. The birthright of our little ones. Their key to Salvation!"

Vera Davenport swallowed. This was getting like some nineteen-thirties sensation novel by a lady novelist. She felt no further desire to dispute on church history with a woman so obviously possessed by religious mania.

"I'm sure your husband was very upset. It seems to have been very badly handled."

"It was not that it was badly handled! It was wrong! Wicked! My husband was devastated—not for himself. For the little ones! And he conceived this terrible idea. He had tried argument, but he could make no way against the awful complacency of the new leaders of the school. So he decided to fight it with his last weapon: his own immortal soul."

Vera had rather liked the bit about complacency: It had echoed something she had often said about the present headmistress. But now she saw the madness that was coming, and all she could say was, "Oh dear."

"He gave his own hope of heaven to draw attention to the terrible danger to our young people. He committed the ultimate sin—despair. He took his own life—in the car, in the garage—and left behind a long letter with all his fears about the souls of the children in his charge."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"It was never read out at the inquest." Her voice blazed with anger. "It was ignored as irrelevant. The coroner said that to read it would be unhelpful. He wanted to bring in a verdict of suicide 'while the balance of his mind was disturbed,' so my husband could have a Christian burial. The letter would have shown how sane, how rational he was, up to the end. I rang journalists, and they all spoke weasel words of sympathy, but said it was 'not appropriate' to print it, that it was 'very long,' and would give people the idea that my husband was 'a fanatic.' His ultimate, terrible sacrifice went for nothing."

"I can see how horrible that must have been for you."

"It is not me! It is not even him!" She brought the knife round, and Vera took a step backwards, her face frankly terrified. "It is the children! What could be more important than the children, and their hope of Salvation?" She crooked her left arm round, as if

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it was holding a baby, and Vera wondered if she had never had a baby of her own. "It is as if you took a baby and you cut its throat." She drew the real knife across the throat of the imaginary baby. "Could you do it?"

Vera's tone was now totally propitiatory. "No. No, of course I couldn't."

"Here, take the knife. Could you even kill an imaginary baby?"

She accepted the knife by the handle. A great wave of relief flooded through her. She was safe. She had been wrong.

"No. It's too horrible," she said. To reinforce the point she let the knife slip, symbolically, to the floor, but took care to put her foot on it. Señora Fides looked at her wide-eyed.

"What did you think?"

"I—I don't know—"

"Never in a million years! You read too many bad novels. I wanted you to *think*—think what you are doing, with your cheap cynicism, your endless echo of 'nothing.'"

She gave her a last look and hurried from the room and out into the street. Vera Davenport watched her go down it, then thoughtfully replaced the knife on the table.

Usually after any experience out of the ordinary she would have gone up to the room of her disciple and friend and shared it with her over a snifter. Tonight she did not. She went up to her own room, had a snifter on her own account, and went to bed early, though not to sleep.

The experience, in fact, led to many hours of thinking over the next few weeks as she lay in her lonely bed back home in Scunthorpe. It would be so easy to make the experience change her life, to respond to the passion and sincerity of Señora Fides. But in the end the woman was, like Gaudí himself, a comically reactionary figure, peddling a version of her religion that was primitive, narrow, and based on fear. There was nothing in Vera's nature that could take her down that road.

She would remain what she temperamentally was: a sceptic, using her intelligence to question, cast doubt, debunk. Every devout believer needed to be balanced by a questioner, just as every questioner needed to be balanced by a devout believer. She was what God had made her: a little, she thought, like that lizard in the jungle greenery, looking quizzically at the Holy Family. ●

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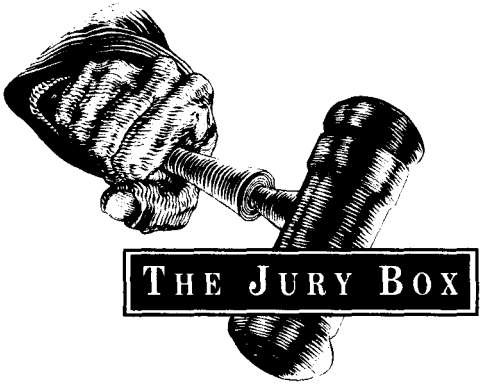

by Jon L. Breen

The lead item in our latest roundup of single-author short-story collections is both compelling reading on its own merits and historically significant, the first collection by one of the most important writers of early pulp detective fiction apart from Hammett and Chandler.

**** Raoul Whitfield: *Jo Gar's Casebook,* Crippen & Landru/ Black Mask Press, $45 limited hardcover, $20 trade paper. Appearing between February 1930 and July 1933 in *Black Mask* under the pseudonym Ramon Decolta, with two additional entries as by Whitfield in 1935 and 1937 issues of *Cosmopolitan*, the Jo Gar stories helped establish the pattern of countless private eye series to come in books, magazines, movies, radio, and TV. The vividly captured Philippines background and multi-ethnic cast were an unusual added dimension. Like Hammett, and unlike the dime-novel-influenced Carroll John Daly, Whitfield fused the physical action and colorful dialogue of the hard-boiled school with the pure detection of the classicists. In most of these 18 stories, Gar has a Manila police contact, first a cautiously friendly one and later his more adversarial successor, whose initial theories of the case are always wrong. Whitfield has frequent recourse (at least once in two stories in a row) to the most familiar whodunit misdirection of private eye fiction, but he uses it nimbly enough to keep the reader guessing. The sequence of connected Jo Gar stories reprinted in *EQMM* in the late 1940s as "The Rainbow Murders" are among the few not gathered here. Editor Keith Alan Deutsch has included two essays and a bibliography of Whitfield's *Black Mask* work by the late pulp scholar E.R. Hagemann, plus a remembrance of Hagemann by R.H. Miller.

**** Anthony Bourdain: *The Bobby Gold Stories,* Bloomsbury, $19.95. The author, a renowned Manhattan chef, includes much

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culinary background, but the mob milieu and black-comedy violence will appeal more to fans of *The Godfather* and *Pulp Fiction* than to the cookbook mystery readership. The experiences of Bobby, the not-all-bad security man-cum-enforcer for a New York nightclub, range from hilarious to harrowing. The cover and blurb of my advance copy call it a novel, but the title is more accurate: each of the dozen connected stories could stand alone.

**** Mat Coward: *Do the World a Favour and Other Stories,* Five Star, $25.95. With droll narrative and dialogue, in a range of quirky and sometimes iconoclastic British voices, and a continuing theme of "specious moral logic," Coward is one of the most original and consistently readable short-story writers now practicing. The afterwords to each tale add to the enjoyment; especially interesting is the distinction he draws between noir and hardboiled, to the advantage of the latter. Of the 14 stories, two are new to print, one (the hilarious "Twelve of the Little Buggers") from *EQMM,* the rest from a variety of periodicals and original anthologies, some not published in the United States. Ian Rankin's appreciative introduction doesn't overstate the case a bit.

**** Edward D. Hoch: *The Iron Angel and Other Tales of the Gypsy Sleuth,* Crippen & Landru, $42 signed limited hardcover, $17 trade paperback. Fifteen tales of Romanian Gypsy King Michael Vlado represent the master of the fair-play puzzle at his best. The colorful background and references to recent European history are a bonus. All are from this magazine save the first, "The Luck of a Gypsy," written for the 1985 anthology *The Ethnic Detectives.*

**** Brendan DuBois: *The Dark Snow and Other Mysteries,* Crippen & Landru, $42 signed limited hardcover, $17 trade paper. The secret to the New Hampshire author's success is simple: have great story ideas and execute them flawlessly. He is essentially a writer of pure suspense, creating a pervasive sense of menace, often in idyllic settings like lakefront cabins. The closest comparison among the genre's giants is Cornell Woolrich. Six of the 11 stories are from *EQMM,* one from *AHMM,* three from *Playboy,* and one from *Mary Higgins Clark Mystery Magazine.* Included is a complete checklist of the author's fiction, and buyers of the limited hardcover get a bonus story, the previously unpublished "By the Light of the Loon."

*** Brendan DuBois: *Tales from the Dark Woods,* Five Star, $25.95. Oddly, this second (and only slightly less distinguished) DuBois collection appeared almost simultaneously and includes two of the same stories ("Dark Corridor" and "The Dark Snow"), along with eight others. (Totals: four from *EQMM,* two from *AHMM,* one from *Playboy,* one from the *Boston Herald Sunday Magazine,* and two from original anthologies.) While the

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author and his publishers may regret the awkward timing, it creates a bonanza for readers and acquisitions librarians, who are advised to scoop up both volumes without delay.

*** Jan Burke: *18,* A.S.A.P., $30. Burke's remarkably varied stories range over history, hauntings, suburban neighbor relations, and domestic tensions. Series sleuth Irene Kelly appears in a single tale of pure detection with a musical background (complete with musician jokes). Two are from *EQMM,* including the unforgettable Readers Award winner "Unharmed"; four from *AHMM;* two new and another new to English language readers; the rest from various magazines and original anthologies. Edward D. Hoch provides an introduction.

*** Walter Mosley: *Six Easy Pieces,* Atria, $24. Actually there are seven tales here—six previously published as add-ons to reprints of the Rawlins novels, the seventh new—about Easy Rawlins, unlicensed private eye of mid-20th-century Los Angeles. While less satisfying than a Mosley novel, the collection is must reading for fans of one of the most complex and fully realized characters in contemporary detective fiction.

*** William Campbell Gault: *Marksman and Other Stories,* Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paperback. Gault was a giant of mid-20th-century detective fiction and a particular favorite of mine. Six non-series stories (most from 1940s and '50s pulps, one from *AHMM)* are quite readable and enjoyable, while the six about L.A. private eye Joe Puma (most from *Manhunt,* one from *EQMM)* are truly outstanding. Aside from editor Bill Pronzini's introduction is a brief afterword by Gault's daughter Shelley.

** Janet Dawson: *Scam and Eggs,* Five Star, $25.95. Three of these ten solidly professional stories, including the title tale, are new, the rest from original anthologies. A pair of reprints feature Dawson's Oakland private eye Jeri Howard, while secondary characters from Howard novels star in two of the new stories. Dawson is strongest on historical research (in stories on Mary Todd Lincoln and the California Gold Rush) and specialized backgrounds—see especially "By the Book," based on her experience as a Naval officer.

A sampling is enough to recommend several additional collections: Charles Sheffield's *The Amazing Dr. Darwin* (Baen, $24), casting not Charles but grandfather Erasmus in the sleuthing role; Joseph Hansen's *Bohannon's Women* (Five Star, $25.95); Stanley Cohen's *A Night in the Manchester Store and Other Stories* (Five Star, $24.95); and two volumes from still active nonagenarians, veteran pulpster Hugh B. Cave's *Come Into My Parlor: Tales From Detective Fiction Weekly* and longtime *EQMM* favorite Michael Gilbert's *The Curious Conspiracy and Other Crimes* (both from Crippen & Landru).

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Art by Ron Bucalo

TIGERS AT TWILIGHT

by Edward D. Hoch

When Barney Kemp's editor, Royce Winters, called him into the office that sunny July morning, he came right to the point. "It's the middle of the baseball season and we want to run a story on the fans."

"Didn't I do that last summer?" Barney asked.

"You did one on American baseball fans. Now we want to run one on Japanese baseball fans."

Barney thought about it. "I suppose I could. It would be something different."

The editor glanced at his notes. "The Tokyo team is called the Yomiuri Giants. They're in first place in the Central League right now. Fly over there for a few days and give me five thousand words. Janice will book your flight."

Barney left the office of *Sports Today* later that afternoon with the round-trip ticket in his pocket. Arranging to fly to Japan for three days was a bit more difficult than Royce had imagined. First Barney had to phone his ex-wife and arrange for her to keep the kids over the weekend. Then he had to phone Trish at her law

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office to cancel their Saturday-night date. At least the packing part was always easy for him, and early the next morning he was at San Francisco International Airport for the flight across the Pacific.

His seatmate proved to be a Japanese businessman, probably in his late thirties, but Barney still had difficulty accurately guessing the ages of Japanese or Chinese, even after a lifetime in San Francisco. "A business trip?" the man asked politely, noticing the laptop computer Barney had brought along.

"Yes. I write for *Sports Today.* Going over to do a story on Japanese baseball fans."

The American baseball season opened in Japan this year, but Edward D. Hoch's tale of intrigue on the diamond concerns Japan's own pro league. The story originally appeared in translation in a Japanese anthology of baseball mysteries. Its first appearance in English, in this issue, provides us with a rare chance to showcase the author's non-series work. But who knows, the story's protagonist, a sports reporter, may yet become a series character. . . .

"Ah! It is a great sport in my country. We live for baseball and golf and skiing. Which fans will you write about?"

"I understand Tokyo's Yomiuri Giants are first in their division."

"No, no, no!" The man seemed suddenly agitated. "You must write about the Hanshin Tigers! No team is their equal in fan support."

Barney was dubious. "I understood the Giants were Japan's first professional team, champions for nine consecutive years back in the 'sixties and 'seventies."

But the man insisted. "You must come see the Hanshin Tigers."

"I don't know. How far is Hanshin from Tokyo?"

He laughed. "You have much to learn about Japanese baseball, Mr.— Please, what is your name?"

"Kemp. Barney Kemp."

"Ah! I am Masashi Saito." They shook hands. "Hanshin is not a place. It is a railroad that owns the team. The ballpark is just fifteen minutes from Osaka—by Hanshin Railway, of course."

"And you live in Osaka?"

"Yes, but that is not why I urge you to write about our fans. The Hanshin Tigers were founded in December of nineteen thirty-five, and took part in my country's first professional baseball season the following year. For the first three years they were Japan's best pro team. Then Tokyo's Yomiuri Giants began to dominate the game, and the rivalry between the two teams has grown fiercer with each season."

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"Did the teams play during the war?"

Saito smiled. "That was long before my time. I know the Tigers were the champions in nineteen forty-four, but I believe after that play was suspended because the young men were in the military. The Allied occupation forces encouraged its resumption after the war."

He talked more about the team and its accomplishments until Barney told him, "You know, by the time we reach Tokyo I think you'll have converted me into a Tigers fan."

As soon as they were off the plane Barney tried to call his office, then remembered the time difference. "Masashi, it's three in the afternoon here. What time is that in San Francisco?"

"Your West Coast is sixteen hours behind us in the summer. It is eleven last evening there."

Barney sighed and settled for leaving a message on Royce's voice mail. "Weather's fine here. I'm off to Osaka to write about the Hanshin Tigers fans. Will call again later."

Osaka was west and a bit south of Tokyo. It was Japan's second-largest city and Saito suggested Barney accompany him on the bullet train. Traveling at speeds of over 150 miles an hour, they reached their destination in about two hours. It was still early evening, but Barney had slept little on the plane. "I'm going to bed," he told his Japanese friend at the hotel.

"If you want, we can take the train out to Koshien Stadium in the morning. There is a big game tomorrow evening, the first of a series against our bitter rival, the Giants. I can even introduce you to some of the players and fans."

"That would be most appreciated," Barney agreed. He was beginning to suspect that Masashi Saito had more than a fan's interest in the Hanshin Tigers.

Barney awakened early to a sunlit morning. The hotel Saito had recommended was one that catered to western businessmen and he was able to eat a substantial breakfast before meeting his new friend at the Hanshin Railway station. Saito had abandoned his business suit for a sport shirt and slacks, and phoned that morning to suggest that Barney do the same. It was, after all, a day at the ballpark.

"We take the ten o'clock train to Kobe," Saito explained, "and get off at the Koshien station. It's only a fifteen-minute ride, and from the station to the stadium is a walk of two or three minutes."

"Fine! I could probably walk twice that far," Barney joked. But once the train pulled out, he had a serious question. "Masashi, just what is your connection with the Tigers? You're obviously more than just a fan."

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The Japanese gentleman smiled. "It is true I have an interest, even something of a financial interest. Koshien Stadium is the oldest ballpark in the country, and the most famous. It was built in nineteen twenty-four, twelve years before we even had professional baseball. In those early years, it was used for high-school tournaments and they still attract a huge television audience. In nineteen thirty-four the great Babe Ruth played an exhibition game there against our university all-stars. A plaque on the stadium wall remembers it. But the old place is greatly in need of upgrading, as you shall see. I am heading a committee to do just that, perhaps even adding a dome."

Barney was having second thoughts about this entire plan. "You realize anything I write would have to be unbiased. I could not promote a commercial venture."

"I understand. Just write what you see."

As Saito had promised, it was just a short walk from the station to Koshien Stadium, a great circular structure with ivy-covered walls that stood like a relic of past glories. They entered through an open gate and almost at once Saito was introducing Barney to one of the groundskeepers, a burly man named Ryo.

"You are American?" Ryo asked.

"Yes, from San Francisco."

"Ah!" he nodded. "I have been to San Francisco. The Golden Gate Bridge."

"That's right," Barney agreed with a smile.

Saito laid a friendly hand on Ryo's shoulder. "We have the best-maintained outfield in Japan, and one of the very few with real grass instead of AstroTurf. Fans praise the sacred Koshien dirt, which has been known to trip up visiting infielders."

Barney glanced around at the empty stands. "How many does it hold?"

"Fifty-five thousand," the groundskeeper replied, "and we get good crowds when the Tigers are playing well. But you can see that it needs much work. The seats and aisles are too narrow, and there are none of the private boxes the newer stadiums have."

"How has the team been doing?" Saito asked. "I've been out of the country for a week."

The burly man shrugged. "Fair. The Tigers are still in third place, behind the Giants and the Swallows. Naoki Kunino is tonight's starting pitcher."

Saito nodded. "He's one of our best, especially effective against the Giants."

A pair of cavorting figures in left field attracted Barney's attention. "What are those?" They wore Tigers pinstripe uniforms and large cartoonish tiger heads.

Saito laughed. "Our team mascots, To-Lucky and Lucky. To-

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Lucky, or Trackey, is practicing a new backflip. He entertains the crowd with acrobatic stunts. Lucky is a girl Tiger who's always chiding him for showing off. Want to meet them?"

Before he could answer, a small thin man came running onto the field, much agitated. "Masashi!" he yelled, and spoke quickly in Japanese.

Saito's face clouded as he listened to the words. "Speak English," he said finally. "This is Barney Kemp, an American writer. Barney, Mr. Yano here is the team's business manager."

Barney shook hands. "Pleased to meet you. What's the trouble?"

"Naoki is gone! He has been kidnapped."

"Tonight's pitcher?"

Saito took over the story from Yano. "He lives in Osaka with his brother. Early this morning his brother was killed and Naoki was kidnapped. They left a ransom note."

Even as he spoke, police cars were pulling up in front of the stadium. Barney's peaceful morning visit was turning suddenly into a top news item.

An hour later he was on the phone to his editor. It was another voice-mail message left in the dead of San Francisco's night. "Royce, this is Barney again. I'm on a hot story here. One of the star pitchers for the Hanshin Tigers, Naoki Kunino, has been kidnapped, his brother slain. The kidnappers are demanding a ransom of ten million yen, over eighty thousand dollars, to be delivered before the start of tonight's game with Tokyo's Yomiuri Giants. More soon."

Sports Today was a weekly magazine, not a daily. Royce could do little with the story until Barney wrote it, but at least he'd know Barney was on top of things. For some reason, Masashi Saito had been allowed into the Tigers office with management and the police, and Barney had tagged along. Perhaps they thought he worked for Saito. The office walls were lined with photos of great Tigers whose names meant little to him. Fumio Fujimura, a pitcher who became a slugger like Babe Ruth, was framed next to the Babe himself, pictured at his Koshien Stadium exhibition game. More pitchers, Masaaki Koyama, Minoru Murayama, and Yutaka Enatsu, where shown above their impressive statistics. Sluggers like Koichi Tabuchi and Masayuki Kakefu were likewise honored, along with a handful of Americans who'd played for the team: Cecil Fielder, Randy Bass, and others.

The chief of detectives was named Captain Noguchi, and he had come out from Osaka where the murder and kidnapping had occurred. He was a slender man who seemed to wear a perpetual frown. About a dozen team officials and coaches were crowded into the front office to hear what he had to say. "Naoki Kunino's

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brother Osamu, a professional kick-boxer, lived with Naoki in a house in Osaka. He often accompanied his brother on personal appearances and acted as his bodyguard."

"We know all that," Mr. Yano said. "Tell us what happened this morning."

"The Osaka police received a telephone call shortly after seven o'clock directing them to the Kunino residence. There were signs of a struggle and spots of blood around the room. Osamu was dead of severe head injuries caused by blows from a blunt instrument. Naoki was missing, and this ransom note was found on the table." He began reading from a sheet of paper inside a clear plastic evidence envelope. The Japanese characters were crudely printed in pencil. "If you want Naoki to pitch tonight, deliver ten million yen in unmarked bills as instructed. Take money in one parcel on the three o'clock train to Osaka. Throw it from a window on the right side when you see a Tigers banner on a pole along the tracks. Do not try to arrest us or Naoki will lose a finger from his pitching hand." The captain passed the ransom letter to Mr. Yano with a sigh. "We are doing everything we can, but the time is limited."

Saito had been quietly translating for Barney while the captain spoke. Now he stepped forward and said in English, "You all know me. My company, Saito Construction, has made a proposal to renovate this stadium and bring it up to modern standards."

"With a dome," Mr. Yano muttered, a trace of contempt in his voice.

"Put that aside for the moment. I think we all agree we must get Naoki back unharmed from his kidnappers. Time is short, and ten million yen in cash is a great deal to raise in a few hours. I stand willing to advance the money on behalf of my company, with no obligation on your part. Perhaps the police will successfully recover it. If not, I am sure the Hanshin Railway will reimburse me in due time."

Mr. Yano and the other office people went into a huddle. As they talked in low voices Saito pointed out that one of them was the team manager, Senichi Hoshino.

"You might have told me of your involvement in the stadium renovation when we were on the plane together," Barney said.

Saito merely smiled. "Would you have come here instead of Tokyo if I had?"

"Probably not," Barney admitted.

After more minutes of whispered conversation, Saito's offer was agreed to. "But only because of the time constraint," Mr. Yano made clear. "Hanshin will pay back every cent with a certified check." His face relaxed into a knowledgeable smile. "Do not think your generosity will move you any closer to building us a domed stadium."

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"Certainly not."

Mr. Yano spoke to the team manager. "Who will you have pitch tonight if Kunino is not released in time?"

"Probably Taninaka or Yabu. But Kunino is most effective against the Giants."

Already Saito was making a call on his mobile phone, instructing one of his employees to gather the necessary currency and bring it to him at the stadium. Barney took the opportunity to speak with Captain Noguchi. "Was any weapon found at the scene?"

The captain shook his head. "No weapon. My men searched the house. There was nothing that could have been used to kill Osamu. The kidnappers were obviously armed, and when Osamu attempted to protect his brother he was killed."

"It must have happened in the early morning."

"Perhaps while it was still dark," Noguchi agreed. "There was a light on in the room where the body was found. Osamu was fully dressed, but he may have been an early riser. Athletes often are."

"What do you think the chances are of Naoki getting out alive?"

Captain Noguchi shrugged. "I am not a betting man, not even on baseball."

Barney walked out with him, and Mr. Yano followed. Somewhat to their surprise, they found Ryo, the groundskeeper, arguing with an attractive young woman trying to get past him to the business office. As soon as she saw Yano she called to him. "Mr. Yano! It's Hanae Nobuo. You remember me." She spoke English and her features indicated a mixed parentage, a combination of high Asian cheekbones and large round eyes. "I am Naoki's fiancée. What's happened to him?"

He went over to her. "We are doing everything to get him back."

"Then it's true? He's been kidnapped?"

"I am afraid so."

"And they have killed his brother Osamu?"

"That is the police report."

She shook her head, close to tears. "I can't believe it! I loved them both, and now—"

Saito joined them and went to comfort her. "We will get him back, I promise you that."

She seemed willing to talk, and Barney asked her, "Who are Naoki's friends? Does he know any gamblers?"

She turned her big brown eyes on him. "Are you an American reporter?"

"A sportswriter. I came here to do a story on the Tigers fans."

She gestured toward the stadium's front gate. "There are his friends, not the gamblers but the fans. I will take you to meet them."

He followed her out to the gate. The word of Naoki Kunino's kidnapping had spread rapidly and over a hundred people, mostly

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young, were gathered there chanting something in Japanese that he couldn't understand. "What is it?" he asked her.

"They want him back. They demand his release. I hope all this publicity does not frighten the kidnappers into killing him."

Barney found a few of the fans that spoke English and talked to them about their team loyalty. Some felt the kidnapping was the work of Tokyo's Yomiuri Giants, their bitter rival. "Only those big orange cockroaches would kill his brother and kidnap him!" one insisted.

"Cockroaches?" Barney asked Hanae.

"Our fans claim the Giants' mascot looks like a cockroach."

Even as they stood there, a bus was unloading more fans. They were angry but orderly, and he felt no fear in their midst. Soon they were singing a tune that she identified as the Hanshin Tigers' fight song. "It's called 'Rokko Oroshi,' 'The Wind of Mount Rokko.' "

"They are dedicated fans," Barney said. "Saito didn't steer me wrong bringing me here."

They moved away from the crowd, and Hanae asked, "Can they rescue Naoki before he's killed?"

"They're trying. They'll pay the ransom as instructed."

She sighed with relief. "He has such big plans for his future. He's not content to be only a pitcher, good as he is. He has dreams of being another Fujimura or Babe Ruth, starting as a pitcher but then becoming a slugger. He practices with his bat all the time. Osamu would pitch to him in the backyard." Her eyes clouded over. "But no more, no more."

"He'll be back," he tried to assure her, feeling none too sure himself.

By two o'clock that afternoon an armored car had delivered the ten million yen to Masashi Saito at the stadium. Captain Noguchi inspected the package and ripped open one corner, exposing the packets of currency. He slipped a tiny button-shaped object into one of the packets. "We'll seal it up with tape," he told them.

"What was that?" Saito asked.

"A homing device so we can locate them after the money is picked up."

"Do you think that's safe?"

"As safe as trusting a kidnapper who's already killed once."

Saito volunteered to throw the money from the train when he saw the Tigers banner by the tracks, but the captain wanted Barney to accompany him. "It will be good for your story," he said, and Barney wondered if the police completely trusted Saito even though it was his own company's money.

They took the parcel containing the ransom and boarded the three o'clock Osaka train. Barney wondered if one of the kidnap-

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pers might be aboard, watching their actions. Saito sat by an open window as the train started its short run to the city. As he watched for the kidnappers' signal he had an intense look on his face that Barney had not seen before.

"There it is!" he said suddenly, and Barney saw the black circle with the tiger's head against a red background at its center. Saito pushed the parcel out the window. Then he used his mobile phone to inform Captain Noguchi that the drop had been made.

"Do you think the police will get them?" Barney asked.

"I hope not, not until Naoki is safe."

"It seems like that was just the right amount of money they demanded. High enough to make the crime worthwhile, yet not so high as to be unreasonable. They knew it was an amount that could be raised in a few hours, even without your help."

They left the train at Osaka and immediately reboarded it for the return journey. Noguchi met them at the station. "We are receiving a signal from the parcel," he said. "It hasn't moved yet and my men are keeping far away."

"They picked a wooded area with underbrush for the drop. You may not get a visual sighting when they come for it."

"We won't need one, Mr. Saito, not with that radio signal."

"What do we do now?"

"We wait."

Barney had never been much of a waiter, especially not when he'd stumbled on a story much bigger than his editor had imagined. Back at Koshien Stadium the crowd had tripled in size and grown noisier. There was a chorus of boos when the buses carrying the Yomiuri Giants went through the gate. "I'd hate to be one of the umpires out there tonight," Barney told the groundskeeper, Ryo.

"They are noisy but well behaved," Ryo answered defensively.

While they talked, a couple of men detached themselves from the mass of chanting fans and walked over to Ryo. They seemed older than the rest of the crowd and reminded Barney of some gambling types he'd known in Vegas. Perhaps they betrayed the same characteristics in all countries. One of them spoke quickly to Ryo in Japanese without giving Barney a second look.

"Who were they?" he asked Ryo when they finally walked away. "Gamblers?"

He gave a quick nod. "There is some betting on the games. They want to know about Kunino but I can tell them nothing."

"If he's not released in time to pitch, that would affect the gambling odds?"

Ryo shrugged. "Not by much. The Tigers are usually the underdogs when we play the Giants."

Still, he wondered about the gamblers' interest.

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Captain Noguchi had remained at the stadium, in telephone contact with his headquarters. He was waiting for word that the ransom money had been taken, but for the first ninety minutes nothing happened. Mr. Yano and the team manager were in the office with him, and presently Saito and Barney joined them.

"Do you think the kidnappers know the police are watching the site?" Mr. Yano wondered.

Noguchi shook his head. "They're well out of sight, relying on the radio transmitter." Down on the field Barney could see the teams working out, though it was still some hours before game time. Two Tigers pitchers were warming up.

Finally, at 4:45, the captain's mobile phone rang. He listened, spoke quickly in Japanese, and hung up. "They've picked it up. The parcel is moving away from the railroad tracks."

"Any word of Kunino?"

"Not yet."

"They should release him now," Mr. Yano said.

"If they intend to," Saito answered grimly. It was something that was on all their minds.

Finally, at a little after five, the team manager said, "I'm going to name Shinji Taninaka as our starting pitcher."

"Let us wait a little longer," Mr. Yano suggested. "Another fifteen minutes."

Five minutes later, the captain's mobile phone rang again. "Noguchi," he answered. A few words in Japanese and he turned to Mr. Yano with a smile. "They freed him. One of our police cars found him walking along a road in the Nishi district."

"What about the kidnappers?"

"We're moving in on them now."

The word of Kunino's release spread like wildfire through the crowd of waiting fans, and a great cheer went up. Twenty minutes later, when a police car and two escorts entered the stadium grounds, the roar was deafening. Mr. Yano, Saito, and the team manager all hurried down to meet him, and Barney tagged along.

Naoki Kunino was fairly tall and lanky, with a friendly face that seemed about to break into a smile. But he wasn't smiling just then, as they whisked him out of the car and into the stadium. He wore jeans and a Tigers T-shirt. His face was bruised, his lower lip was swollen and caked with dried blood. There was much talking, some sort of argument, before the team manager threw up his hands and agreed to something. "They wanted him to go to the hospital for a checkup," Saito explained, "but he insists he's all right. He wants to pitch tonight against the Giants."

Inside the clubhouse the rest of the team bustled around. Even the team mascot, Trackey, hurried over, carrying his tiger head under his arm. "This is a reporter, Barney Kemp," Saito said when

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the crowd of well-wishers around Kunino had thinned. "Tell us what happened."

The pitcher looked down for a moment. "The officers told me my brother is dead. Is that true?"

"I am afraid so," Captain Noguchi replied. "Tell us about the men who kidnapped you."

"I saw only two, both wearing ski masks. They entered through a window before dawn. Osamu and I were awakened by the noise. We both tried to fight them off, but one of them punched me in the face and I went down. That's all I remember."

"When did you regain consciousness?"

"It was just after noon. I think they gave me something to knock me out. I was in a room somewhere, blindfolded and handcuffed to a metal bed frame. I could hear the two of them talking in another room, but couldn't quite understand what they were saying. After a while there was silence and I think one of them had gone. Nothing happened for a long time. Then, at three-thirty, I heard a mobile phone ring. The man spoke on it briefly. I heard him walk over to the door. He warned me he had a gun but said the ransom had been paid and they were going to free me. He cuffed my hands behind me and left the blindfold on, directing me down a few steps to the door. There was a car outside and he put me in the backseat. He drove for a time and then turned onto a dirt road. He stopped the car and undid my handcuffs, but warned me to keep the blindfold on or he would have to shoot me. He helped me out of the car and told me to count to a hundred, slowly. Then he drove away. I took off the blindfold and found myself in the middle of an empty lot. I headed for the road and started walking. There wasn't much traffic, and no one stopped for me until a police car came along."

Mr. Yano nodded sadly. "We would understand if you did not want to pitch tonight, after what happened to you and your brother."

"No, I will pitch. If the Giants fans are behind this, they cannot be allowed to win."

The clubhouse door opened and Hanae Nobuo rushed in, almost throwing herself into his arms. "Naoki! I never thought I'd see you alive again!"

"Hanae, my love!"

"Did they hurt you? Are you all right?"

"I am fine. My brother—"

"I know. It's terrible!"

He turned to the police captain. "Did they get away with the ransom?"

"We are on their trail," he replied. "We expect an arrest soon."

Outside, the gates were opened and more fans began to arrive

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by foot and car and chartered bus. The word had spread that Kunino was safe. Senichi Hoshino, the fatherly team manager, asked again if Naoki really thought he could pitch after everything that had happened. "You should take the night off, Naoki. Your face is bruised and you have had a terrible experience."

"I will pitch," Naoki insisted, "and I will dedicate this game to my brother."

The stadium lights had been turned on, because the sun was low and it would be dark before the game finished. Kunino was changing into his uniform while the captain made another call to his men. "I've told them to move in on the person with the ransom money," he said. "I'm going there now to wrap this up."

"May I come along?" Barney asked.

Captain Noguchi scowled at him. "You are a sportswriter, are you not? The sport is here in the stadium, not on the trail of kidnappers."

"It's part of the story. I want to come. I may be able to help."

A chorus of boos could be heard from the early fans as the Yomiuri Giants started warming up on the field.

Once they were in the car, Noguchi explained that his men had tracked the little radio transmitter on a route away from the tracks and toward a densely populated suburb. It was nowhere near the spot where the police car had found Kunino, but that was no surprise.

"Why haven't you moved in already?"

"There are at least two kidnappers involved. We hope this one will lead us to the other."

He drove them to an area near Osaka Bay where several other police cars, some unmarked, were waiting. "Where is he?" Captain Noguchi asked.

"In the video game arcade in the next block. He has the parcel with him."

They were speaking English, perhaps so passersby would not catch the conversation. Barney knew that adults in Japan frequented such arcades, but still he asked, "How old is this person?"

The captain shot him a disapproving look, but already the officer had answered. "About sixteen or seventeen."

"Let's go get him."

The youth had a small dragon tattoo visible on his left arm beneath a black T-shirt, and he wore his hair in the latest punk style. He looked startled when the officers grabbed his arms from both sides and hustled him away from the video game. Captain Noguchi himself took charge of the large parcel on the floor by the young man's feet.

His name was Imado, he told them, and a man had paid him ten thousand yen to pick up a parcel by the railroad tracks. He was sup-

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posed to receive the same amount when he delivered it to the man.

"What did he look like?" Noguchi asked.

His face had been dirty and he wore a hat that covered much of it. Imado could not identify him. He'd been due at the video arcade at six, but he hadn't shown up.

"Take him downtown for further questioning," Noguchi ordered. He ripped open a corner of the package to make certain the ransom money was still there, and then handed it to a deputy. "Bring this along," he said. "We can return it to Masashi Saito."

On the drive back to the stadium, with the deputy following in a second car, Barney said to the captain, "Let me tell you a story."

"About what?"

"About Naoki Kunino's kidnappers."

The game had progressed quickly in the two hours they'd been gone. It was still twilight, but already they'd reached the beginning of the eighth inning and Kunino was still pitching. The score was 1-0 in favor of the Tigers. They joined Saito and Mr. Yano in the press box, and the business manager told them in hushed tones, "Kunino has given up no hits."

It was true. The box score read 0-0-1 for the Giants and 1-2-0 for the Tigers. They watched as Kunino threw a fastball to the first Giant up in the eighth. A swing and a miss, strike one. The next pitch was a ball, followed by strike two. Then the left-handed batter hit a line drive down to first base. The Tiger player leaped high in the air to snag it and the first man was out.

"He only needs to retire five more batters," Barney said, half to himself. "Is it a perfect game so far?"

Saito shook his head. "He walked a man in the fourth. But there are no hits yet."

The second Giant to face Kunino in the eighth inning walked too, putting the tying run at first base. Captain Noguchi watched it all in nervous silence while Barney made a few more notes for his story. The fans were chanting louder with each pitch, and Saito pointed out that the crowd on the left-field side was a contingent of Giants fans that had come down from Tokyo on the bullet train. The third batter took a ball but then hit into a double play and the side was retired.

"Three more," Saito said.

The Tigers could do nothing in the bottom of the eighth. The mascots, Trackey and Lucky, went into their act between innings. Trackey did a couple of backflips and then launched himself at the wire fence, all to Lucky's disdain. The crowd loved it. That was when Captain Noguchi took another phone call from his office.

At the top of the ninth they still held a one-run lead as Kunino strode to the mound. Even at this distance Barney could see the

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bruises on his face. He threw three balls in a row to the first batter and Mr. Yano thought he might be tiring. The next pitch was a strike and they relaxed a bit. Barney glanced down at the crowd and saw Hanae in one of the front boxes. She leaped to her feet as the Giants batter hit a high fly for an easy out. But Kunino had trouble with the next man. He hit the first pitch and what should have been an easy out was dropped by the shortstop for an error. There were still no hits for the Giants, but the tying run was on first base with only one out. The Tigers fans quieted a bit as the next batter came up. He was Kazuhiro Kiyohara, Saito told Barney, one of their best long-ball hitters.

A strike, a ball, another ball, a strike, a ball. A three-two count. Naoki Kunino stepped off the pitcher's mound as the manager came out to talk to him. Someone had started warming up in the bull pen. The crowd fell silent, waiting. After a moment's conversation, the manager nodded and walked back to the dugout. Kunino stepped back on the mound and started his windup.

The Giants batter swung hard and hit a long fly ball to deep left field. It was a good catch, and the runner barely managed to advance to second base. "He is tiring," Mr. Yano said again. But there was no thought of taking him out now.

The sun was gone now, and all was darkness beyond the pool of stadium lights. Virtually every one of the fifty-five thousand seats was filled, and no one was leaving. Barney thought about the traffic jam after the game, something he always worried about back home.

The batter swung his bat a few times, warming up, then stepped into the box and faced Naoki Kunino. The young man with the bruised face and swollen lip took his time, as if measuring off that distance he knew so well. Then he fired his best fastball, what some swore later was one of the best pitches he'd ever thrown. The bat tipped it and sent it back to the pitcher's mound where Kunino himself caught it for the final out.

He had pitched a no-hit game against the dreaded Giants and the crowd went wild. As his teammates carried him off the field in triumph, Captain Noguchi and one of his officers made their way down to the locker room with Barney following along. Kunino was still signing autographs at the dugout, sweaty but smiling. Finally he came in to receive more congratulations and a sea of reporters and photographers. It was not until he'd showered and changed clothes, not until the locker room was empty of reporters and teammates, that Captain Noguchi walked up to him as Barney watched.

"Naoki Kunino," he said, speaking formally, "you are under arrest for the murder of your brother Osamu."

Earlier, on the drive back to Koshien Stadium, Barney had outlined the case against Kunino. "You see, Captain, there were flaws

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in Naoki's story which led me to examine everything else. He was very specific about the time while he was held prisoner, but how could he have known that the phone rang at three-thirty if he was blindfolded during that entire period? He said the kidnappers awakened him and Osamu before dawn, yet both of them were dressed. Certainly Naoki had been beaten in a fight, but suppose the fight was with his brother rather than kidnappers. You said there was nothing found in the house that could have been the murder weapon, yet Hanae told us Naoki was trying to improve his batting and Osamu pitched to him in the backyard. If so, what happened to the bat? It was a natural murder weapon. Had it disappeared because it was the murder weapon, rather than something the kidnappers brought with them?"

"How can we prove that?" the captain had asked.

"Phone your medical examiner right now and ask him to check Osamu's head wounds for wood splinters or traces of pine tar."

"You're saying they fought, Osamu punched him in the face, and Naoki killed him with a baseball bat?"

"Yes. I think Naoki sat up all night waiting for his brother to come home. That would explain why they were dressed before daylight. When Naoki realized what he'd done, he invented the kidnapping story and left a ransom note. This afternoon, making sure he wasn't recognized, with dirt on his face to cover the bruises, he paid that kid to pick up the parcel along the railroad tracks. He had no intention of claiming it, knowing we probably had it bugged. He didn't care about the money because the whole kidnapping was merely a hoax to cover up what he'd done."

"Why did they fight? Why would he kill his brother?"

"Hanae told us in her own words. She said 'I loved them both,' and she meant it quite literally."

After Noguchi received word on his mobile phone that the autopsy had indeed found traces of wood splinters and pine tar in Osamu's head wounds, he decided to make the arrest. Naoki Kunino did not deny the charge, but simply stared at the locker-room floor in silence. Then he asked one favor of the captain. "Do not take me out in handcuffs. I must show dignity to my fans."

He left the stadium between Noguchi and the officer, waving to the fans still gathered outside to chant his name. Then, as they were crossing the street to the police car, he broke free and rushed into the path of one of the big fan buses. It happened so fast that nothing could have saved him.

In the morning an English-language newspaper headlined: *Tigers Hero Dies After Pitching No-Hit Game.* No one suggested it was anything but a tragic accident, and Barney knew the truth would never be part of his story. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE MAN ON THE BEACH

by Henning Mankell

Translated from the Swedish by Laurie Thompson

Born in a village in northern Sweden, Henning Mankell moved south in the '70s to write for the theater, and quickly became Sweden's most-performed playwright. His 1973 first novel initiated a body of work that includes novels set in Africa (he directs Mozambique's Teatro Avenida), children's books, and the Inspector Wallander mysteries, which consistently make the bestseller lists in Sweden and elsewhere (in Germany, five have reached number one). In the U.S., The New Press has released six of the novels, and last year's, *One Step Behind*, is currently nominated for the *L.A. Times* Book Prize. Previous to this, no Wallander short story has been published in English.

On the afternoon of Sunday, April 26, 1987, Detective Chief Inspector Kurt Wallander sat in his office in the Ystad police station, absent-mindedly clipping some hair from one of his nostrils. It was shortly after five o'clock. He had just put down a file documenting the activities of a gang smuggling stolen luxury cars to Poland. The investigation had already celebrated its tenth anniversary, admittedly with various breaks as the years passed by. It had begun not long after Wallander had first started work in Ystad. He'd often wondered if it would still be under way on that far distant day when he started to draw his pension.

Just for once, his desk was neat and tidy. It had been a chaotic mess for a long time, but since he was now, temporarily, a grass widower, he'd used the bad weather as an excuse to do some extra work. A few days previously Mona and Linda had left for a couple of weeks in the Canaries. It had come as a complete surprise to

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Wallander. He had no idea how Mona had managed to scrape together the money, and Linda hadn't breathed a word, either. Despite the opposition of her parents, she had recently insisted on leaving high school. Now she seemed to be constantly irritated, tired, and confused. He'd driven them to Sturup airport early in the morning, and on the way back home to Ystad had decided that, in fact, he quite liked the idea of a couple of weeks on his own. His and Mona's marriage was heading for the rocks. Neither of them knew what was wrong, but it was obvious that this last year Linda was the one holding their relationship together. What would happen now that she'd left school and was starting to make her own way in life?

He stood up and walked over to the window. The wind was pulling and tugging at the trees on the other side of the street. It was drizzling. Plus four Celsius, the thermometer said. No sign of spring yet.

He put on his jacket and left the room. He nodded to the weekend receptionist, who was talking on the phone, went to his car, and drove towards the centre of town. After inserting a Maria Callas cassette into the player on the dashboard he wondered what to buy for the evening meal.

Should he buy anything at all, in fact? Was he even hungry? He was annoyed by his indecision, but had no desire to fall into his old bad habit of eating at some hamburger bar. Mona kept telling him that he was getting fat, and she was right. One morning only a few months previously he'd examined his face in the bathroom mirror and realised that his youth was definitely a thing of the past. He would soon be forty, but he looked older. In the old days he'd always looked younger than he really was.

Irritated by the thought, he turned into the Malmö road and stopped at one of the supermarkets. He had just locked his car door when his cell phone rang from inside. At first he thought he'd ignore it. Whatever it was, somebody else could take care of it. He had enough problems of his own just now. But he changed his mind, opened the door, and reached for the phone.

"Is that Wallander?" It was his colleague Hansson.

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"I was just going to buy some groceries."

"Leave that for now. Come here instead. I'm at the hospital. I'll meet you at the entrance."

"What's happened?"

"It's hard to explain over the phone. It'll be better if you come here."

End of call. Wallander knew that Hansson wouldn't have phoned if it wasn't serious. It only took him a few minutes to drive

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to the hospital. Hansson came to meet him outside the main entrance. He was obviously feeling the cold. Wallander tried to work out from his expression what had happened.

"What's going on?" Wallander asked.

"There's a taxi driver by the name of Stenberg in there," said Hansson. "He's drinking coffee and is very upset."

Wallander followed Hansson through the glass doors, still wondering what had happened. The hospital cafeteria was to the right. They walked past an old man in a wheelchair, slowly chewing at an apple. Wallander recognised Stenberg, who was alone at a table. He'd met the man before, but couldn't put his finger on when or where. Stenberg was in his fifties, on the portly side, and almost completely bald. His nose was bent, suggesting he'd been a boxer in his younger days.

"Maybe you recognise Inspector Wallander?" Hansson said.

Stenberg nodded and stood up to shake hands.

"No, don't stand up," said Wallander. "Tell me what's happened instead."

Stenberg's eyes were constantly on the move. Wallander could see the man was very upset, or even scared. He couldn't yet tell which.

"I got a call to take some bloke from Svarte back to Ystad," Stenberg said. "The fare was supposed to wait by the main road. Alexandersson, his name was. Sure enough, there he was when I arrived there. He got into the backseat and asked me to take him back to town. As far as the square. I could see in the rearview mirror that he had his eyes closed. I thought he was having a snooze. We came to Ystad and I drove to the square and told him we were there. He didn't react at all. I got out of the car, opened the back door, and tapped him on the shoulder. No reaction. I thought he must be ill, so I drove him to the emergency unit at the hospital. They said he was dead."

Wallander frowned. "Dead?"

"They tried to revive him," Hansson said. "But it was too late. He was dead."

Wallander thought for a moment.

"It takes about fifteen minutes from Svarte to Ystad," he said to Stenberg. "Did he look ill when you picked him up?"

"If he'd been ill, I'd have noticed," said Stenberg. "Besides, he'd have asked to be taken to the hospital, surely?"

"You didn't notice any injury?"

"Not a thing. He was wearing a suit and a light blue overcoat."

"Was he carrying anything? A suitcase or some such thing?"

"No, nothing. I thought I'd better phone the police. Although I expect the hospital will have to do that in any case."

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Stenberg's answers were immediate, without hesitation. Wallander turned to Hansson.

"Do we know who he is?"

Hansson took out his notebook.

"Göran Alexandersson," Hansson said. "Forty-nine years of age. Runs his own business, electronics. Lives in Stockholm. He had quite a lot of money in his wallet. And several credit cards."

"Odd," Wallander said. "I assume it must have been a heart attack. What do the doctors say?"

"That only a postmortem will give the definite cause of death."

Wallander stood up. "You can contact whoever's in charge of his estate and claim your fare," he said to Stenberg. "We'll be in touch if we have any more questions."

"It was a nasty experience, sure," said Stenberg firmly, "but I'm damned if I'm going to ask his next of kin to pay me for driving a corpse to the hospital."

Stenberg left.

"I'd like to take a look at him," said Wallander. "You don't need to come as well, if you don't want to."

"I'd rather not," said Hansson. "I'll try and get in touch with his next of kin."

"What was he doing in Ystad?" wondered Wallander. "That's something we ought to find out."

Wallander only stayed with the body for a short time, in a room in the emergency unit. The dead man's expression gave nothing away. He searched his clothes. Like his shoes, they were of high quality. If it transpired that a crime had been committed, the forensic team would need to take a closer look at the clothes. He found nothing in the man's wallet that Hansson hadn't already mentioned. Then he went to talk to one of the doctors.

"It appears to be death by natural causes," said the doctor. "No sign of any violence, no injuries."

"Who on earth could have killed him while he was in the backseat of a taxicab?" asked Wallander. "Let me have the postmortem results as soon as you can, please."

"We'll transfer him to the coroner's office in Lund now," the doctor said. "Unless the police have anything against that?"

"No," said Wallander. "Why should we?"

He drove back to the police station and called on Hansson, who was just winding up a telephone call. As he waited for him to finish, Wallander felt at his stomach, which was hanging out over his belt.

"I've just spoken to Alexandersson's office in Stockholm," Hansson said as he put down the receiver. "To his secretary and his number two. They were shocked, of course. But they were able to

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tell us that Alexandersson has been divorced for the last ten years."

"Did he have any children?"

"One son."

"We'd better find him, then."

"That won't be possible," Hansson said.

"Why not?"

"Because he's dead."

Wallander could sometimes get very annoyed by Hansson's roundabout way of coming to the point. This was one of those occasions.

"Dead? What do you mean, dead? Do I have to drag every detail out of you?"

Hansson checked his notes.

"His only child, a son, died nearly seven years ago. Apparently it was some sort of an accident. I couldn't quite grasp what they meant."

"Did the son have a name?"

"Bengt."

"Did you ask what Göran Alexandersson was doing in Ystad? Or Svarte?"

"He'd told them he was going on holiday for a week. He'd be staying at the King Charles Hotel. He arrived four days ago."

"Right, let's go there," Wallander said.

They spent over an hour going through Alexandersson's room, but found nothing of interest. Only an empty suitcase, some clothes neatly hung in the wardrobe, and a spare pair of shoes.

"Not a single sheet of paper," said Wallander thoughtfully. "No book, nothing."

Then he called reception and asked if Alexandersson had received or made any telephone calls, or had any visitors. The receptionist's reply was crystal clear: Nobody had rung Room 211, nobody had been to visit.

"He's staying here in Ystad," Wallander said, "but he calls a taxi from Svarte. Question: How did he get there in the first place?"

"I'll phone the taxi firms," said Hansson.

They drove back to the police station. Wallander stood in his window, absent-mindedly contemplating the water tower on the other side of the street. He found himself thinking about Mona and Linda. They were probably in some restaurant or other, having dinner. But what were they talking about? What Linda was going to do next, no doubt. He tried to imagine their conversation. All he could hear was the humming from the radiators. He sat down to write a preliminary report while Hansson was phoning the Ystad taxi firms. Before starting, he went to the coffee room and helped himself to some biscuits that somebody had aban-

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doned. It was nearly eight by the time Hansson knocked on his door and came in.

"He's taken a cab out to Svarte three times in the four days he's been here in Ystad," Hansson said. "He's been dropped off on the edge of the village each time. He went out early in the morning and ordered a taxi to take him back in the afternoon."

Wallander was miles away, but nodded in acknowledgment.

"That's not against the law," he said. "Perhaps he had a mistress there?"

Wallander stood up and walked over to the window. The wind was building up.

"Let's put a tracer on him through the computer records," he said after a few moments' thought. "I get the impression we'll draw a blank. But let's do it even so. Then we'll have a good look at the postmortem report."

"I expect it was a heart attack," said Hansson, rising to leave.

"No doubt you're right," said Wallander.

Wallander drove home and opened a tin of sausages. Göran Alexandersson was already fading out of his consciousness. After eating his simple meal, he fell asleep in front of the television.

The following day Wallander's colleague Martinsson made a computer search through all available criminal registers for the name Göran Alexandersson. Martinsson was the youngest member of the investigation team, and the one most willing to embrace new technology. There was nothing.

Wallander devoted the day to the stolen luxury cars being driven around Poland. In the evening he went to see his father in Löderup and played cards for a few hours. They ended up quarrelling over who owed whom and how much. As Wallander drove home, he wondered if he would grow like his father as he got older. Or had he already started developing in that way? Argumentative, whingeing, and miserable? He ought to ask somebody. Perhaps somebody other than Mona.

On the morning of April 28, Wallander's phone rang. It was the coroner's office in Lund.

"I'm calling in connection with a person by the name of Göran Alexandersson," said the doctor at the other end of the line. He was called Jörne and Wallander knew him from his time in Malmö.

"What was it?" Wallander asked. "Cerebral hemorrhage or a heart attack?"

"Neither," said the doctor. "Either he committed suicide or he was murdered."

Wallander pricked up his ears.

"Murdered? What do you mean by that?"

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"Exactly what I say," said Jörne.

"But that's impossible. He can't have been murdered in the backseat of a taxi. Stenberg, the driver of the cab, isn't the type who goes round killing people. But surely he can't have committed suicide, either?"

"I can't tell you how it happened," said Jörne indifferently. "But what I can tell you with absolute certainty is that he died from a poison that got into his system somehow or other, either something he'd eaten or something he'd drunk. That seems to me to suggest murder. Of course, it's your business to establish that."

Wallander made no comment.

"I'll fax the papers over to you," said Jörne. "Are you still there?"

"Yes," Wallander said. "I'm still here."

He thanked Jörne, replaced the receiver, and thought about what he'd just been told. Then he asked Hansson over the intercom to come to his office right away. Wallander took one of his notepads and wrote two words.

Göran Alexandersson.

Outside the police station, the wind was getting stronger. Some gusts were already gale strength.

The squally wind continued blowing all over Skåne. Wallander sat in his office and contemplated the fact that he had no idea what had happened to the man who had died in the backseat of a taxi some days previously. At 9:30 he went to one of the conference rooms and closed the door behind him. Hansson and Rydberg were already sitting at the table. Wallander was surprised to see Rydberg. He'd been off work with back pains, and given no indication that he was ready to return.

"How are you?" Wallander asked.

"I'm here," said Rydberg evasively. "What's all this nonsense about a man being murdered in the backseat of a taxi?"

"Let's start at the beginning," Wallander said.

He looked round. Somebody was missing.

"Where's Martinsson?"

"He phoned in to say he'd got quinsy," said Rydberg. "Maybe Svedberg can stand in for him?"

"We'll see if we need him," said Wallander, picking up his papers. The fax had arrived from Lund.

Then he turned to his colleagues.

"What started off looking like a straightforward case could turn out to be much more problematic than I'd thought. A man died in the backseat of a taxi. The pathologists in Lund have established that he was poisoned. What we don't know yet is how long before his death the poison got into his system. Lund promises to let us know that in a few days."

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"Murder or suicide?" Rydberg wondered.

"Murder," said Wallander without hesitation. "I find it hard to imagine a suicide taking poison and then ringing for a taxi."

"Could he have taken the poison by mistake?" Hansson asked.

"Hardly likely," said Wallander. "According to the doctors it's a most unusual mixture of poisons."

"What do they mean by that?" Hansson asked.

"It's something that can only be made up by a specialist—a doctor, a chemist, or a biologist, for instance."

Silence.

"So, we need to regard this as a murder case," Wallander said. "What do we know about this man, Göran Alexandersson?"

Hansson leafed through his notebook. "He was a businessman," he said. "He owned two electronics shops in Stockholm. One in Västberga, the other in Nortull. He lived alone in a flat in Åsögatan. He doesn't seem to have had any family. His divorced wife evidently lives in France. His son died seven years ago. The employees I've spoken to all describe him in exactly the same way."

"How?" asked Wallander.

"They say he was nice."

"Nice?"

"That was the word they all used. Nice."

Wallander raised an eyebrow.

"Anything else?"

"He appears to have led a pretty humdrum existence. His secretary guessed that he probably collected stamps. Catalogues kept arriving at the office. He doesn't seem to have had any close friends. At least, none that his colleagues knew about."

Nobody said anything.

"We'd better ask Stockholm to help us with his flat," Wallander said when the silence had started to feel oppressive. "And we must get in touch with his ex-wife. I'll concentrate on trying to find out what he was doing down here in Skåne, in Ystad, and Svarte. Who did he meet? We can assemble again this afternoon and see how far we've got."

"One thing puzzles me," said Rydberg. "Can a person be murdered without knowing anything about it?"

Wallander nodded. "That's an interesting thought," he said. "Somebody gives Göran Alexandersson some poison that doesn't have any effect until an hour later. I'll ask Jörne to answer that one."

"If he can," muttered Rydberg. "I wouldn't count on it."

The meeting was over. They went their different ways after sharing out the various tasks. Wallander stood in the window of

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his office, coffee cup in hand, and tried to make up his mind where to start.

Half an hour later he was in his car, on the way to Svarte. The wind was slowly dropping. The sun shone through the parting clouds. For the first time that year Wallander had the feeling that perhaps spring really was on the way at last. He stopped when he came to the edge of Svarte and got out of the car. Alexandersson came here, he thought. He came in the morning and returned to Ystad in the afternoon. On the fourth occasion, he was poisoned and died in the backseat of a taxi.

Wallander started walking towards the village. Many of the houses on the beach side of the road were holiday homes, and boarded up for the winter. He walked right through the village, and only saw two people. The desolation made him feel depressed. He turned around and walked quickly back to his car.

He had already started the engine when he noticed an elderly lady working in a flower bed in a garden next to where the car was parked. He switched off and got out. When he closed the door, the woman turned to look at him. Wallander walked over to her fence, raising his hand in greeting.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said.

"Nobody disturbs anybody here," said the woman, giving him an inquisitive look.

"My name's Kurt Wallander and I'm a police officer from Ystad," he said.

"I recognise you," she said. "Have I seen you on TV? Some current-affairs debate or other?"

"I don't think so," Wallander said. "But my picture has been in the papers now and then, I'm afraid."

"My name's Agnes Ehn," said the woman, reaching out her hand.

"Do you live here all year round?" Wallander asked, shaking it.

"No, just the summer half of the year. I usually move out here at the beginning of April, and stay till October. I spend the winter in Halmstad. I'm a retired schoolteacher. My husband died a few years ago."

"It's pretty here," said Wallander. "Pretty, and quiet. Everybody knows everybody else, I suppose."

"I don't know about that," she said. "Sometimes you don't even know your next-door neighbor."

"Do you happen to have seen a man on his own who came here to Svarte by taxi several times this last week? And was then collected by taxi again in the afternoon?"

Her reply surprised him.

"He used the telephone in my house to ring for the taxi," she said. "Three days in a row, in fact. Assuming it's the same man."

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"Did he say his name?"
"He was very polite."
"Did he introduce himself?"
"You can be polite without saying what your name is."
"And he asked to use your phone?"
"Yes."
"Did he say anything else?"
"Has something happened to him?"
Wallander thought he might as well tell her the truth.
"He's dead."
"That's awful. What happened?"
"We don't know. All we know at the moment is that he's dead. Do you know what he did here in Svarte? Did he say who he'd come to see? Where did he go to? Was there anybody with him? Anything at all you can remember is important."
She surprised him again with her precise reply.
"He walked down to the beach," she said. "There's a path leading to the beach on the other side of the house. He took that. Then he walked along the sands in a westerly direction. He didn't come back until afternoon."
"He walked along the beach? Was he alone?"
"I can't tell you that. The beach curves away. He might have met somebody further away, where I can't see."
"Did he have anything with him? A briefcase or a parcel, for instance?"
She shook her head.
"Did he seem worried at all?"
"Not as far as I could tell."
"But he borrowed your telephone yesterday?"
"Yes."
"Did you notice anything worth mentioning?"
"He seemed to be a very nice, friendly man. He insisted on paying for all the telephone calls."
"I see. Many thanks. You've been a big help," Wallander said, giving her his business card. "If you remember anything else, do call me at the number on the card."
"It's a tragedy," she said. "Such a pleasant man."
Wallander went around to the other side of the house and walked down the path to the beach. He went as far as the water's edge. The beach was deserted. When he turned back he saw that Agnes Ehn was watching him.
He must have met somebody, Wallander thought. *There's no other plausible explanation. The only question is, who?*
He drove back to the police station. Rydberg stopped him in the corridor and told him he'd managed to track Alexandersson's ex-wife to a house on the Riviera.

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"Nobody answered the telephone," he said. "I'll try again later."

"Good," said Wallander. "Let me know when you get hold of her."

"Martinsson came in," said Rydberg. "It was almost impossible to understand a word he said. I told him to go home again."

"You did right," Wallander said.

He went to his office, closed the door behind him, and pulled over the notepad on which he'd written Göran Alexandersson's name. *Who?* he wondered. *Who did you meet on the beach? I must find out.*

By one o'clock Wallander felt hungry. He'd put on his jacket and was about to leave when Hansson knocked on his door. It was obvious he had something important to say.

"I've got something that could prove to be significant," Hansson said.

"What?"

"As you'll recall, Alexandersson had a son who died seven years ago. It looks very much as if he was murdered. As far as I can see, nobody's ever been found and prosecuted for it."

Wallander looked long and hard at Hansson.

"Good," he said eventually. "Now we've got something to go on. Even if I can't put my finger on what it is." The hunger he'd been feeling shortly beforehand had disappeared.

Soon after two that afternoon, Rydberg knocked on Wallander's half-open door. "I've made contact with Alexandersson's ex-wife," he said as he came into the room. He pulled a face as he sat down on the visitor's chair.

"How's your back?" Wallander asked.

"I don't know," said Rydberg. "It still doesn't feel quite right."

"Perhaps you started work again too soon?"

"Lying at home staring at the ceiling wouldn't do it any good."

That put an end to any discussion about Rydberg's back. Wallander knew it was a waste of time trying to persuade Rydberg to go home and rest.

"What did she have to say?" he asked instead.

"She was shocked, naturally enough. It must have been a minute before she was able to say anything at all."

"That will have been an expensive call for the Swedish state," said Wallander. "But then, though? After that minute had passed."

"She asked what had happened, of course. I gave her the facts. She had trouble understanding what I was talking about."

"That's hardly surprising," said Wallander.

"Anyway, I found out that they were not in touch with each other. According to the wife, they divorced because their married life was so boring."

Wallander frowned. "What exactly did she mean?"

"I suspect that's a more common reason for divorce than people

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realise," said Rydberg. "I think it would be awful, having to live with a boring person."

Wallander thought that one over. He wondered if Mona had the same view about him. What did he think himself?

"I asked her if she could think of anybody who might want to murder him, but she couldn't. Then I asked her if she could explain what he was doing in Skåne, but she didn't know that, either. That was all."

"Didn't you ask her about that son of hers who died? The one Hansson says was murdered?"

"Of course I did. But she didn't want to talk about it."

"Isn't that a bit odd?"

"That's exactly what I thought."

"I think you'll have to talk to her again," Wallander said.

Rydberg agreed and left the room. Wallander thought he'd have to find an opportunity to talk to Mona and ask her if boredom was the biggest problem as far as their marriage was concerned. His train of thought was interrupted by the phone ringing. It was Ebba, in reception, telling him that the Stockholm police wanted to talk to him. He pulled over his notepad and listened. An officer by the name of Rendel was put through to him. Wallander had never had any contact with him before.

"We've been to take a look at that flat in Åsögatan," Rendel said.

"Did you find anything?"

"How could we find anything when we've no idea what we're looking for?"

Wallander could hear that Rendel was under pressure.

"What was the flat like?" Wallander asked, as nicely as he could.

"Clean and neat," said Rendel. "Everything in its place. A bit austere. I had the impression of a bachelor pad."

"That's what it was, in fact," Wallander said.

"We had a look at his mail," said Rendel. "He seems to have been away for a week at most."

"That's correct," said Wallander.

"He had a telephone answering machine, but there was nothing on it. Nobody had tried to phone him."

"What was the message he'd recorded?" Wallander asked.

"Just the usual."

"Well, at least we know that," said Wallander. "Thanks for your help. We'll come back to you if we need anything else."

He hung up and saw from the clock that it was time for the afternoon meeting of the investigative team. When he got to the conference room he found that Hansson and Rydberg were already there.

"I've just been speaking to Stockholm," Wallander said as he sat down. "They found nothing of interest in the flat in Åsögatan."

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"I phoned the ex-wife again," said Rydberg. "She was still unwilling to talk about her son, but when I told her we could make her come back home for questioning, she thawed out a bit. The lad was evidently beaten up in a street in the center of Stockholm. It must have been a totally pointless attack. He wasn't even robbed."

"I've dug up some documentation about that attack," said Hansson. "The case hasn't yet been written off, but nobody's done anything about it for the last five years or more."

"Are there any suspects?" Wallander wondered.

Hansson shook his head. "None at all. There's absolutely nothing. No witnesses, nothing."

Wallander pushed his notepad to one side. "Just as little as we've got to go on here at the moment," he said.

When nobody spoke, Wallander realised he would have to say something.

"You'll have to speak to the people working in his shops," he said. "Phone Rendel from the Stockholm force and ask him for some assistance. We'll meet again tomorrow."

They shared out the tasks that had to be done, and Wallander went back to his office. He thought he ought to call his father and apologise for the previous night. But he didn't. He couldn't get what had happened to Göran Alexandersson out of his mind. The whole situation was so preposterous that it ought to be explicable on those grounds alone. He knew from experience that all murders, and most other crimes as well, had something logical about them, somewhere. It was just a matter of turning over the right stones in the correct order, and following up possible connections between them.

Wallander left the police station shortly before five o'clock and took the coastal road to Svarte. This time he parked further into the village. He took a pair of Wellingtons out of the boot, put them on, then walked down to the beach. In the distance he could see a cargo ship steaming westwards.

He started walking along the beach, examining the houses on his right side. There seemed to be somebody living in every third one of them. He kept on walking until he'd left Svarte behind. Then he turned back. He suddenly got the feeling he was hoping that Mona would appear from nowhere, walking towards him. He thought back to their time in Skagen. That had been the best part of their life together. They had so much to talk about, things they never had time to do.

He shook off such unpleasant thoughts and forced himself to concentrate on Göran Alexandersson. As he walked along the sands he tried to make up a summary of the case so far.

What did they know? That Alexandersson lived by himself, that he owned two electronics shops, that he was forty-nine years of

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age, and that he'd travelled to Ystad and stayed at the King Charles Hotel. He'd told his staff he was going on holiday. While at the hotel he'd received neither telephone calls nor visitors. Nor had he used the phone in his room himself. Every morning he'd taken a taxi out to Svarte, where he'd spent the day walking up and down the beach. In the afternoon, he'd returned to Ystad after borrowing Agnes Ehn's telephone. On the fourth day, he'd entered the backseat of a taxi and died.

Wallander stopped and looked around. The beach was still deserted.

Alexandersson must have been visible nearly all the time, he thought, but somewhere along these sands he disappears. Then he comes back again, and a few minutes later, he's dead. He must have met somebody here. Or rather, he must have arranged to meet somebody. You don't bump into a poisoner by accident.

Wallander started walking again. He eyed the houses located along the beach. The following day they would start the house-to-house operation. Somebody must have seen Alexandersson walking on the sands, somebody might have seen him meeting somebody else.

It struck Wallander that he was no longer alone on the beach. An elderly man was coming towards him. He had a black Labrador trotting decorously along by his side. Wallander paused and looked at the dog. He'd lately been wondering if he ought to suggest to Mona that they should buy a dog, but he hadn't done so because he so often found himself working unsociable hours. In all probability a dog would mean more bad conscience rather than more company.

The man raised his cap as he approached Wallander.

"Are we going to have any spring this year, do you think?" the man asked.

Wallander noticed that he didn't speak with a local accent.

"I expect it will turn up eventually this year, as usual," Wallander replied.

The man was about to continue on his way when Wallander spoke again.

"I take it you go walking along the beach every day," he said.

The man pointed at one of the houses.

"I've been living here ever since I retired," he said.

"My name's Wallander and I'm a police officer in Ystad. Do you happen to have seen a man of about fifty walking along the sands here on his own in recent days?"

The man's eyes were blue and bright. His white hair stuck out from under his cap.

"No," he said with a smile. "Who would want to come walking

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here? I'm the only person who walks along this beach. Mind you, in May when it gets a bit warmer, it will be a different story."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Wallander asked.

"I walk the dog three times every day," said the man. "I haven't seen any man wandering around here on his own. Until now, that is. Not until you appeared."

Wallander smiled.

"Don't let me disturb you any longer," he said.

Wallander resumed walking. When he stopped and turned around, the man with the dog was no longer in sight.

Where the thought—or rather, the feeling—came from, he never managed to work out. Nevertheless, from that moment on, he was quite certain. There'd been something about the man's expression, a faint, almost imperceptible movement of his eyes, when Wallander asked him if he'd seen a solitary man walking along the beach. *He knows something,* Wallander thought. *The question is, what?*

Wallander looked around once more. The beach was deserted.

He stood there motionless for several minutes. Then he went back to his car and drove home.

Wednesday, April 29, was the first day of spring in Skåne that year. Wallander woke up early, as usual. He was sweaty and knew he'd had a nightmare, but couldn't remember what it was about. Perhaps he'd dreamt yet again about being chased by bulls? Or that Mona had left him? He took a shower, had a cup of coffee, and leafed absent-mindedly through the *Ystad Chronicle.*

He was in his office at the Ystad police station as early as six-thirty. The sun was shining from a clear blue sky. Wallander hoped that Martinsson had recovered and could take over the computer searches from Hansson. That usually produced better and faster results. If Martinsson was fit again, he could take Hansson with him to Svarte and start knocking on doors. But perhaps the most important thing just now was to try to create as accurate a picture as possible of Göran Alexandersson. Martinsson was much more thorough than Hansson when it came to contact with people who might be able to provide information. Wallander also decided that they ought to make a serious effort to find out what had really happened when Alexandersson's son was beaten to death.

When the clock showed seven, Wallander tried to get hold of Jörne, who had carried out the postmortem on Alexandersson, but in vain. He realised he was being impatient. The case of the dead man in the backseat of Stenberg's taxi was making him uneasy.

It was 7:58 when they assembled in the conference room. Rydberg reported that Martinsson still had a fever and a very sore throat. Wallander thought how typical it was that Martinsson should succumb to something of this sort when he was so obsessed

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by bacilli in general.

"Okay, in that case it'll be you and me knocking on doors in Svarte today," he said. "You, Hansson, stay here and keep digging away. I'd like to know more about Alexandersson's son Bengt, and how he died. Ask Rendel for help."

"Do we know any more about that poison yet?" asked Rydberg.

"I tried to get an answer by this morning," Wallander said, "but I haven't heard anything yet and can't raise a response from anybody."

The meeting was very short. Wallander asked for an enlargement of the photograph on Alexandersson's driver's license, plus several copies of it. Then he went to see Björk, the chief of police. On the whole, he thought Björk was good at his job and let everybody get on with their own thing. Occasionally, however, he would suddenly become proactive and ask to be given a rundown on the latest situation in an investigation.

"How's it going with that gang exporting the luxury cars?" Björk asked, dropping his hands onto his desk as a sign that he wanted a concise answer.

"Badly," said Wallander truthfully.

"Are any arrests imminent?"

"No, none," Wallander told him. "If I were to go to one of the prosecutors with the evidence I have available, they'd throw me out with no more ado."

"We mustn't give up, though," said Björk.

"Of course not," said Wallander. "I'll keep chipping away. As soon as we've solved this business of the man who died in the backseat of a taxi."

"Hansson's told me about that," said Björk. "It all sounds very strange."

"It is strange," said Wallander.

"Can that man really have been murdered?"

"The doctors tell us he was," Wallander said. "We'll be conducting a house-to-house operation today out at Svarte. Somebody must have seen him."

"Keep me informed," said Björk, standing up as a signal that the conversation was at an end.

They drove to Svarte in Wallander's car.

"Skåne is beautiful," said Rydberg, apropos of nothing.

"On a day like this, at least," said Wallander. "But let's face it, it can be pretty awful in the autumn. When the mud's higher than your doorstep. Or when it seeps in under your skin."

"Who's thinking about autumn now?" said Rydberg. "Why worry about the bad weather in advance? It'll come eventually, like it or not."

Wallander didn't respond. He was too busy overtaking a tractor.

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"Let's start with the houses along the beach to the west of the village," he said. "We can go off in different directions and work our way towards the middle. Try to find out who lives in the empty houses as well."

"What are you hoping to find?" Rydberg asked.

"The solution," he replied without beating about the bush. "Somebody must have seen him out there on the beach. Somebody must have seen him meeting some other person."

Wallander parked the car. He let Rydberg start with the house where Agnes Ehn lived. Meanwhile, Wallander tried to contact Jörne from his cell phone. No luck this time, either. He drove a bit further in a westerly direction, then parked the car and started working his way east. The first house was an old, well-cared-for traditional Skåne cottage. He opened the gate, went down the path, and rang the doorbell. When there was no reply, he rang again, and was just about to leave when the door was opened by a woman in her thirties, dressed in a stained overall.

"I don't like being interrupted," she said, glaring at Wallander.

"Sometimes it's necessary, I'm afraid," he said, showing her his ID.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"You may find my question a little odd," Wallander said, "but I want to know if you've seen a man aged about fifty wearing a light blue overcoat walking along the beach in the last few days."

She raised her eyebrows and looked at Wallander with a smile.

"I paint with the curtains drawn," she said. "I haven't seen anything at all."

"You're an artist," said Wallander. "I thought you needed light."

"I don't. But that's not a jailable offence, is it?"

"So you haven't seen anything at all?"

"No, nothing—that's what I just said, isn't it?"

"Is there anybody else here in the house who might have seen something?"

"I have a cat who likes to lie on a window ledge behind the curtains. You can ask him if you like."

Wallander could feel himself getting annoyed. "It's sometimes necessary for police officers to ask questions, you know. Don't think I'm doing this for fun. I won't disturb you any longer."

The woman shut the door. He heard her engaging several locks, then moved on to the next property. It was a relatively recently built two-storey house. There was a little fountain in the garden. When he rang the bell a dog started barking. He waited.

The dog stopped barking and the door opened. He was faced by the old man he'd met on the beach the previous day. Wallander had the immediate impression that the man was not surprised to see him. He'd been expecting him, and was on his guard.

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"You again," said the man.

"Yes," Wallander said. "I'm knocking on the doors of people who live in houses along the beach."

"I told you yesterday that I hadn't seen anything."

Wallander nodded. "People sometimes remember things afterwards," he said.

The man stepped aside and let Wallander into the house. The Labrador sniffed inquisitively at him.

"Do you live here all year round?" asked Wallander.

"Yes," said the man. "I was a GP in Nynäshamn for twenty years. When I retired we moved here, my wife and I."

"Maybe she saw something?" Wallander said. "Assuming she's here?"

"She's ill," said the man. "She hasn't seen anything."

Wallander produced a notebook from his pocket. "Can I have your name?" he asked.

"I'm Martin Stenholm," the man said. "My wife's called Kajsa."

Wallander noted down the names and put the book back into his pocket.

"I won't disturb you anymore," he said.

"No problem," said Stenholm.

"I might come back in a few days' time and speak to your wife," he said. "Sometimes it's better for people to say for themselves what they've seen or haven't seen."

"I don't think there would be much point," said Stenholm. "My wife is very ill. She has cancer, and is dying."

"I understand," Wallander said. "In that case I won't come back and intrude."

Stenholm opened the door for him.

"Is your wife also a doctor?" Wallander asked.

"No," said the man. "She was a lawyer."

Wallander walked down the path to the road, then on to three more houses, none of which produced any information. He caught sight of Rydberg, and could see he had almost finished his quota of doors to knock on. Wallander collected his car and waited for Rydberg outside Agnes Ehn's house. When Rydberg arrived, he had no positive information. Nobody had seen Göran Alexandersson on the sands.

"I always thought people were curious," Rydberg said. "Especially in the country, and especially where strangers are concerned."

They drove back to Ystad. Wallander didn't say a word. When they got back to the police station he asked Rydberg to find Hansson and bring him to Wallander's office. He then phoned the coroner's office in Lund and this time managed to get hold of Jörne.

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Hansson and Rydberg had arrived by the time he had finished the call. Wallander looked questioningly at Hansson.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Nothing that changes the picture we already have of Alexandersson." Hansson said.

"I've just spoken to Jörne," said Wallander. "The poison that killed Alexandersson could very well have been administered without his noticing it. It's not possible to say precisely how fast it works. Jörne guessed it would be at least half an hour. When death does come, it happens very quickly."

"So we're right in our suppositions so far," said Hansson. "Does this poison have a name?"

Wallander read out the complicated chemical description he'd written down on his notepad. Then he told them about the conversation he'd had with Martin Stenholm.

"I don't know why," he said, "but I can't help feeling we'll find the solution to our problem in that doctor's house."

"A doctor knows about poisons," Rydberg said. "That's always a start."

"You're right, of course," said Wallander. "But there's something else as well. I can't put my finger on it, though."

"Shall I run a search through the registers?" asked Hansson. "It's a pity Martinsson is ill. He's best at that sort of thing."

Wallander gave him the go-ahead. Then an idea struck him.

"Do one for his wife as well. Kajsa Stenholm."

The investigation was put on ice for the Valpurgis Night holiday and the weekend. Wallander spent a large part of his free time at his father's house. He devoted one afternoon to repainting the kitchen. He also phoned Rydberg, for no other reason than the fact that Rydberg was as solitary as he was. Rydberg turned out to be drunk and so the conversation was a very short one.

On Monday, May 4, he was back at the police station early. While he waited to hear if Hansson had found anything of interest in the registers, he resumed his work on the gang smuggling stolen cars into Poland. Hansson eventually turned up at eleven-fifteen.

"I can't find a thing about Martin Stenholm," he said. "It looks as if he's never done a dishonest thing in the whole of his life."

Wallander wasn't in the least surprised. He'd been aware from the start that they could be heading into a cul-de-sac.

"What about his wife?"

Hansson shook his head.

"Even less," said Hansson. "She was a prosecutor in Nynäshamn for many years."

Hansson put a file full of papers on Wallander's desk.

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"I'll have another chat with the taxi drivers," he said. "Perhaps they've seen something without realising it."

When Hansson had left, Wallander opened the file. It took him an hour to work his way carefully through all the documents. For once Hansson hadn't overlooked anything. Even so, Wallander was convinced that Alexandersson's death had something to do with the old doctor. He knew without knowing, as so many times before. It was true that he didn't trust his intuition, but he couldn't deny that it had served him well many times in the past. He phoned Rydberg, who came to his office straightaway. Wallander handed him the file.

"I'd like you to read through this," he said. "Neither Hansson nor I can see anything of interest, but I'm sure we're missing something."

"We can forget Hansson," Rydberg said, making no attempt to disguise the fact that his respect for his colleague was limited.

Late that afternoon Rydberg returned the file, shaking his head. He hadn't found anything, either.

"We'll have to start again from the beginning," said Wallander. "Let's meet here in my office tomorrow morning and decide where we go from here."

An hour later Wallander left the police station and drove to Svarte. Once again he took a long walk along the beach. He didn't see another soul. Then he sat in his car and read one more time through the material Hansson had given him. *What is it that I'm missing?* he asked himself. *There is a link between this doctor and Göran Alexandersson. It's just that I can't see what it is.*

He drove back to Ystad and took the file home with him to Mariagatan. They'd lived in the same three-roomed flat ever since they moved to Ystad fourteen years earlier. He tried to relax, but the file gave him no peace. As midnight approached, he sat down at the kitchen table and went through it yet again. Although he was very tired, he did in fact find one detail that caught his attention. He knew it could well be of no significance. Nevertheless, he decided to look into it early the following morning.

He slept badly that night. It was drizzling over Ystad next morning. Wallander was back at the police station by seven A.M. He knew the man he was looking for was just as much of an early bird as he was. He went to the part of the building that housed the prosecution authorities and knocked on Per Åkeson's door. As usual, the room was in chaos. Åkeson and Wallander had worked together for many years and had great faith in each other's judgment. Åkeson pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and looked at Wallander.

"Are you here already?" he said. "So early? That must mean you have something important to tell me."

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"I don't know if it's important," Wallander said, "but I need your help."

Wallander moved several bundles of paper from the visitor's chair to the floor and sat down. Then he summarised briefly the circumstances of Göran Alexandersson's death.

"It sounds very strange," said Åkeson when Wallander had finished.

"Strange things do happen now and then," Wallander said. "You know that as well as I do."

"I don't think you've come here at seven in the morning just to tell me this. I hope you're not going to suggest we should arrest that doctor?"

"I need your help with his wife," Wallander said. "Kajsa Stenholm. A former colleague of yours. She worked in Nynäshamn for many years. But she was on secondment several times. Seven years ago she was standing in for somebody in Stockholm. It happened to be at the same time that Alexandersson's son was attacked and killed. I need your help to find out if there is a connection between those two events."

Wallander leafed through his papers before continuing.

"The son was called Bengt," he said eventually. "Bengt Alexandersson. He was eighteen when he died."

Åkeson leaned his chair back and frowned. "What do you think might have happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Wallander, "but I want to find out if there could be some sort of link. If Kajsa Stenholm was somehow or other involved in the investigation into the death of Bengt Alexandersson."

"I take it you want to know as soon as possible?"

Wallander nodded. "You ought to know by now that my patience is more or less non-existent," he said, rising to his feet.

"I'll see what I can do," said Åkeson. "But don't expect the earth."

When Wallander passed through reception on his way back to his office, he asked Ebba to send Rydberg and Hansson to see him as soon as they came in.

"How are you nowadays?" Ebba asked. "Are you getting a good night's sleep?"

"I sometimes feel I'm sleeping too much," said Wallander evasively. Ebba was a rock in reception, and kept a maternal watch on everybody's state of health. Wallander sometimes had to fend off her concern in as friendly a way as possible.

Hansson came to Wallander's office shortly after eight-fifteen, and Rydberg followed soon afterwards. Wallander summarised briefly what he'd found in what were already being called "Hansson's papers."

"We'll have to wait and see what Åkeson comes up with," said

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Wallander. "Maybe it's just a meaningless guess on my part. On the other hand, if it does turn out that Kajsa Stenholm was seconded to Stockholm when Bengt Alexandersson was murdered and that she was involved in the investigation, we've found the link we've been looking for."

"Didn't you say she was on her deathbed?" wondered Rydberg.

"That's what her husband claimed," Wallander said. "I haven't actually met her."

"With all due respect for your ability to find your way through complicated criminal investigations, this seems pretty vague to me," said Hansson. "Let's suppose that you are right. That Kajsa Stenholm was, in fact, involved in the investigation into the killing of young Alexandersson. So what? Are you suggesting a woman dying of cancer murdered a man who turned up out of her past?"

"It *is* very vague," Wallander admitted. "Let's wait and see what Åkeson comes up with."

When Wallander was alone in his office again, he sat around for some time in a state of indecision. He wondered what Mona and Linda were doing at the moment. And what they were talking about. At about nine-thirty he went to fetch a cup of coffee, and another one an hour or so later. He'd just got back to his office when the telephone rang. It was Per Åkeson.

"It went quicker than I'd expected," he said. "Have you a pen handy?"

"I'm all set," Wallander said.

"Between March tenth and October ninth, nineteen eighty, Kajsa Stenholm was working as a prosecutor in the city of Stockholm," Åkeson said. "With some help from an efficient registry clerk at the county court I found the answer to your second question, about whether Kajsa Stenholm had been involved in the Bengt Alexandersson case."

He paused. Wallander could feel the tension rising.

"It seems you were right," said Åkeson. "She was in charge of the preliminary investigation, and she was also the one who eventually put it on ice when the killer wasn't found."

"Thank you for your help," said Wallander. "I'll look into this. I'll be in touch in due course."

He hung up and walked over to the window. The pane was misted over. It was raining more heavily now. *There's only one thing to do,* he thought. *I must get inside the house and find out what actually happened.* He decided to take only Rydberg with him. He called him and Hansson on the intercom, and when they were in his office he told them what Åkeson had found out.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Hansson.

"I thought you and I should take a ride out there," Wallander said to Rydberg. "Three would be one too many."

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Hansson nodded; he understood.

They drove to Svarte in Wallander's car. Neither spoke. Wallander parked about a hundred meters short of Stenholm's property.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Rydberg as they walked through the rain.

"Be there," Wallander said. "That's all."

It suddenly struck Wallander that this was the first time Rydberg had ever assisted him, rather than the other way around. Rydberg had never formally lorded it over his colleague, it didn't suit his temperament to be a boss: They had always worked in tandem. But during the years Wallander had been in Ystad, it was Rydberg who'd been his mentor. Everything he knew today about the work of a police officer was mainly due to Rydberg.

They went through the gate and up to the front door. Wallander rang the bell. As if they'd been expected, the door was opened almost immediately by the elderly doctor. Wallander thought in passing that it was odd the Labrador hadn't appeared.

"I hope we're not disturbing you," Wallander said, "but we have a few more questions that can't wait, unfortunately."

"What about?"

Wallander noticed that all the friendliness the man had shown before had gone. He seemed scared and irritated.

"About that man on the beach," Wallander said.

"I've already told you I've never seen him."

"We'd also like to talk to your wife."

"I've told you she's fatally ill. What could she have seen? She's in bed. I don't understand why you can't leave us in peace!"

"Then we won't disturb you anymore," said Wallander. "Not just now, at least. But I've no doubt we'll be back. And then you'll have to let us in."

He took Rydberg's arm and piloted him towards the gate. The door closed behind them.

"Why did you give in so easily?" Rydberg asked.

"Something you taught me," Wallander said. "That it does no harm to let people stew for a while. Besides, I need authority from Åkeson to search the house."

"Is he really the one who killed Alexandersson?" asked Rydberg.

"Yes," said Wallander. "I'm certain of it. He's the one. But I still don't understand how it all hangs together."

That afternoon Wallander received the authorization he needed. He decided to wait until the next morning, but to cover himself, he persuaded Björk to have a guard placed on the house until then.

When Wallander woke up as dawn was breaking the next morning, May 7, and opened the curtains, Ystad was covered in fog. Before taking a shower he did something he'd forgotten to do the previous night: He looked up Stenholm in the telephone directory.

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There was no mention of a Martin or Kajsa Stenholm. He phoned directory enquiries and ascertained that the number was ex-directory. He nodded to himself, as if that was exactly what he'd expected.

As he drank his morning cup of coffee, he asked himself if he should take Rydberg with him, or drive out to Svarte on his own. It wasn't until he was behind the wheel that he decided to go by himself. The fog was thick along the coast road. Wallander drove very slowly. It was nearly eight when he pulled up outside the Stenholm house. He walked through the gate and rang the doorbell. It wasn't until the third ring that the door opened. When Stenholm saw that it was Wallander, he tried to slam it shut again, but Wallander managed to put his foot in the way.

"What right have you to break in here?" shouted the old man in a shrill voice.

"I'm not breaking in," Wallander said. "I have a search warrant. You might as well accept that. Can we sit down somewhere?"

Stenholm suddenly seemed resigned. Wallander followed him into a room full of books. Wallander sat down in a leather armchair and Stenholm sat opposite him.

"Do you really have nothing to say to me?" Wallander asked.

"I haven't seen anybody wandering up and down the beach. Nor has my wife, who's seriously ill. She's in bed upstairs."

Wallander decided to come straight to the point. There was no reason to beat about the bush any longer.

"Your wife was a public prosecutor," he said. "For most of nineteen eighty she was seconded to Stockholm. Among a lot of other things, she was in charge of a preliminary investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of eighteen-year-old Bengt Alexandersson. She was also responsible for putting the case on ice some months later. Do you recall those events?"

"Of course not," said Stenholm. "It has always been our habit not to talk shop at home. She said nothing about the people she was prosecuting, I said nothing about my patients."

"The man who's been walking on the beach here was the father of Bengt Alexandersson," said Wallander. "He was poisoned and died in the backseat of a taxi. Do you think that seems to be a mere coincidence?"

Stenholm made no reply. And then the penny suddenly dropped for Wallander.

"When you retired, you moved down from Nynäshamn to Skåne," he said slowly. "To a place at the back of beyond like Svarte. You're not even in the telephone book; your number's ex-directory. Needless to say, that could be because you want to be left in peace and quiet, to live out your old age in anonymity. But there could be another explanation. You might have moved out

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here as discreetly as possible in order to escape from something or somebody. Perhaps to get away from a man who can't understand why a prosecutor didn't put more effort into solving the pointless murder of his only child. You moved, but he tracked you down. I don't suppose we'll ever know how he managed that. But one day, there he is on the beach. You meet him while you're out walking your dog. Naturally, it's a big shock. He repeats his accusations, he may even have made threats. Your wife is seriously ill upstairs. I have no doubt that's the case. The man on the beach keeps on coming back, day after day. He won't let you shake him off. You see no way of getting rid of him. No way out at all. Then you invite him into your house. Presumably you promise him that he can talk to your wife. You give him some poison, possibly in a cup of coffee. Then you suddenly change your mind and tell him to come back the next day. Your wife is in great pain, or perhaps she's asleep. But you know he'll never come back. The problem is solved. Göran Alexandersson will die of something that looks like a heart attack. Nobody has ever seen you together, nobody knows about the link between you. Is that what happened?"

Stenholm sat motionless in his chair.

Wallander waited. He could see through the window that the fog was still very thick. Then the man raised his head.

"My wife never did anything wrong," he said. "But times changed, crimes multiplied and became more serious. Overworked police officers and courts struggled in vain to cope. You should know that, you're a policeman yourself. That's why it was most unjust for Alexandersson to blame my wife when the murder of his son was never solved. He persecuted us and threatened us and terrorised us for seven years. And he did it in such a way that we could never actually pin anything on him."

Stenholm fell silent. Then he stood up.

"Let's go up to my wife. She can tell you about it herself."

"That's not necessary anymore," Wallander said.

"For me, it's necessary," said Stenholm.

They went up the stairs. Kajsa Stenholm was lying in a sick bed in a large, bright, airy room. The Labrador was lying on the floor beside the bed.

"She's not asleep," said Stenholm. "Go up to her and ask her whatever you like."

Wallander approached the bed. Her face was so thin, her skin was stretched tight over her cranium. Wallander realised she was dead. He turned around quickly. The old man was standing in the doorway. He was holding a pistol, aimed at Wallander.

"I knew you'd come back," he said. "That's why it's as well she died."

"Put the gun down," Wallander said.

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Stenholm shook his head. Wallander could feel himself stiffening with fear.

Then everything happened very fast. Stenholm suddenly pointed the gun at his own head and pulled the trigger. The shot echoed through the room. The man was thrown halfway through the door. Blood spurted over the walls. Wallander felt as if he were about to faint. Then he staggered out of the door and down the stairs. He phoned the police station. Ebba answered.

"Hansson or Rydberg," he said. "As quick as bloody well possible."

It was Rydberg who came to the phone.

"It's all over," said Wallander. "I want a serious-incident response to the house in Svarte. The whole circus. I've got two dead bodies here."

"Did you kill them? What's happened?" Rydberg asked. "Are you hurt? Why the hell did you go there on your own?"

"I don't know," Wallander said. "Get a move on. I'm not hurt."

Wallander went outside to wait. The beach was covered in fog. He thought about what the old doctor had said. About crimes becoming more frequent and more serious. Wallander had often thought that as well. He sometimes felt he was a police officer from another age. Even though he was only forty. Maybe a new kind of police officer was needed nowadays?

He waited in the fog for them to arrive from Ystad. He was deeply upset. Yet again, against his will, he'd found himself involved in a tragedy. He wondered how long he'd be able to keep going.

When the emergency services arrived and Rydberg got out of his car, it seemed to him that Wallander was a black shadow in the white fog.

"What's happened?" Rydberg asked.

"We've solved the case of the man who died in the backseat of Stenberg's taxi," Wallander said.

He could see that Rydberg was waiting for something more, but there would be nothing more.

"That's all," he said. "That's all we've done, in fact."

Then Wallander turned on his heel and walked down to the beach. Soon he had disappeared into the fog. ●

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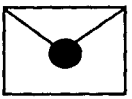

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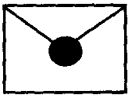

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MURDER PREMEDITATED

by Robin Hathaway

"I have the most wonderful doctor." The woman took a tiny bite of her tea sandwich (watercress on whole wheat with no crust).

"Really? I'm looking for a doctor. Mine's retiring."

"Well, you'd love mine. He's in solo practice, he still makes house calls, and—he plays these wonderful CDs while you're in the examining room. 'Sounds of the Forest,' 'Water Flowing.' So relaxing."

"He sounds delightful. May I have his name?"

"Fenimore. Andrew B. Fenimore. His nurse is nice, too. But his office assistant is, well, a little scruffy."

Around the time this issue goes to the printer, the first in a new series by Robin Hathaway, from St. Martin's Press, will be making its way into stores. Entitled *Scarecrow*, the book introduces female sleuth Jo Banks. But Ms. Hathaway has not abandoned her popular series hero Dr. Fenimore. He stars in this new story and in a novel due out in the autumn of 2003, *The Doctor Dines in Prague* (St. Martin's). ✝

There was a lull between patients and Fenimore knew his office assistant had something on his mind. Usually the teenager wore his Walkman and went about his office chores as if in a daze, absorbed by sounds neither the doctor nor his nurse understood or approved. But today, the minute the last patient closed the door behind her, Horatio (a.k.a. "Rat") burst out, "This dude, Max, got sprung. He's back after three years on an A and B charge!"

In Fenimore's neighborhood, if you didn't see someone for a while you assumed they had either moved away or were on vacation. In Horatio's neighborhood, if someone was missing for a few months or years, they were often doing time.

"What's an A and B?" asked Mrs. Doyle.

"Assault and Battery," Fenimore said, enlightening her.

"It's weird," Horatio went on, "the guy's totally changed."

"In what way, Rat?" Fenimore was interested.

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"He used to be real tough. I mean, if Max was sitting on his steps I'd cross the street to avoid him. The slightest thing could set him off."

"Like what?" Mrs. Doyle turned from her typewriter.

"Like—if you sneezed, or kicked a soda can, or talked too much, or laughed too loud. And you didn't dare take your boom box anywhere near him. He'd punch you out."

"Hmm." The doctor caressed his chin. "What's wrong with that?"

Horatio scowled. "He was violent. He had this fire in his eyes. I'm not kidding. At night, if he got mad, his eyes glowed red in the dark. He scared the shit out of me."

"And now?"

"And now—he sits on his steps all day, just like before, but when you walk by—he smiles and nods!" Horatio shook his head. "A real pussycat."

"Maybe he's one of those Born Again people," said Mrs. Doyle thoughtfully.

"Nah. He doesn't hand out pamphlets or ask if you're saved or nothin'. He just smiles and nods." Horatio perched on the corner of Mrs. Doyle's desk to better address his audience. "One day I was walkin' past and his eyes had this glazed look. The kind druggies get. He didn't nod and smile; he just stared straight ahead. I was worried he might be having a seizure or something. I've seen druggies do that. It's horrible. I snapped my fingers in his face. Something I'd never do before. He didn't even blink. It was like he was in a trance or something."

"Maybe he was," Fenimore said.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, maybe he learned self-hypnosis in prison."

"You kiddin'?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

Horatio thought about this. "Okay, I will." He pulled on his Walkman and went back to work. The doctor and nurse exchanged glances.

A week passed before the subject of Max arose again. Usually during the lunch hour, Horatio ducked out and bought a hot dog and a soda from a vendor. But today, he stayed in the office, sitting on a straight-backed chair, staring into space. He wasn't even wearing his Walkman.

Mrs. Doyle, on her way to the kitchen to make a cup of tea, stopped and stared at him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

No response.

"Horatio?"

Still no reaction.

She shook his shoulder and it was as if she'd shaken one of

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those statues on Kelly Drive. She hurried into the doctor's private office. He was deep in an article on echocardiography. "Come quick," she said. "Something's wrong with Horatio."

The doctor rushed out. He looked at the teenager. He snapped his fingers near his face. He shook him gently. "Rat," he said. The boy shook his head and gradually focused on Fenimore.

"That's better. What have you been up to?"

Horatio smiled a slow smile. "TM," he said.

"TM?"

"Yeah. Transcendental meditation." He pronounced the words carefully. "It's cool."

"Where did you learn that?"

"From my buddy, Max."

Fenimore looked puzzled.

"Remember? I told you about him. The guy who was sent up?"

"Ah."

"They taught him this stuff up there. It makes you calm. Real calm."

Fenimore wished he had a camera to catch Mrs. Doyle's expression.

"And now he's teaching you?" he said.

"Right."

"Well, it's time to snap out of it. It's lunchtime."

Without any argument, Horatio headed for the door and his favorite vendor.

A few days later, Fenimore was examining a patient when he heard strange noises coming from the outer office. Birds singing? Crickets chirping? He stepped out. "What's that?"

Mrs. Doyle nodded at Horatio's boom box. " 'Sounds of the Forest,' " she said.

"It's relaxing." Horatio said. "Good for the nerves." He smiled a beatific smile.

"My nerves are just fine. Shut that thing off."

A middle-aged woman, swathed in a pale blue examining gown, padded into the outer office. Her expression was serene. "How lovely, Doctor. Don't turn it off. It reminds me of summers at my home in Maine."

With a backward glare at Horatio, Fenimore followed his patient into the examining room.

The next day it was "Sounds of Flowing Water." Brooks, streams, waterfalls. Thinking the roof was leaking, Fenimore rushed out of his office. He found his staff sitting immobile, eyes closed, listening to the watery sounds coming from the boom box.

"What's going on here?" he cried.

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Their eyes popped open.

"It's lunch hour," Horatio said mildly. "We're relaxing."

"Yes," said Mrs. Doyle with a dreamy expression. "You should try it, Doctor."

He slammed his inner-office door behind him.

That was on Friday. The next Monday, when Fenimore came into the office, Mrs. Doyle was energetically typing. Horatio was busily filing, his Walkman back in place. The boom box was nowhere to be seen. Silence reigned.

It was lunch hour before the doctor dared interrupt such industriousness. Curious, he decided to join his staff for lunch. A special event, as he usually used this precious time to peruse his journals. "So." He unwrapped his sandwich and balanced his Coke on the arm of his chair, "What happened to the forest?"

"Huh?" Horatio looked up from his hot dog with the innocence of a newborn babe.

"You know—all that peeping and chirping."

"Ohhh, we got tired of that. Right, Mrs. Doyle?"

"Right." Mrs. Doyle concentrated on dunking her teabag into the cup of steaming water.

"And the fountains and rivers and waterfalls?"

"Enuff's enuff. Right, Doyle?"

"Right." She carefully measured two teaspoons of sugar into her cup.

Fenimore took a deep swallow of Coke. "How's Max?" he asked.

Apparently, some of Horatio's soda went down the wrong way, because he coughed at length.

Mrs. Doyle stirred her tea.

"Well?" Fenimore was used to getting answers from his staff.

"He whacked his old lady with a lamp," Horatio spoke rapidly, "and she croaked."

"Why?"

"She walked in front of the TV screen during a Sixers game."

Fenimore considered. "And Max?"

"He'll get life, or . . ." The boy let the sentence hang.

Fenimore drained his Coke, crumpled the can, and tossed it across the room—missing the wastebasket by a wide margin.

Horatio retrieved it and tossed it inside. "Well, it worked for a while," he said defensively.

Mrs. Doyle sipped her tea in diplomatic silence.

Fenimore bought the "Forest" and "Water" CDs from Horatio for half price (well, they *were* used) and played them in the examining room. But only if the patient requested it. The doctor found they tended to put him to sleep. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE LIST

by Steven Otfinoski

It was waiting for him on his desk when he entered the office. A clean, crisp piece of white-bond typing paper with a dozen names neatly typed in alphabetical order, last name first. It was a short list, unlike in the old days when two columns of names, single-spaced, would fill the entire page. But back then the state had many enemies to deal with. Times had changed. Or had they? He suspected not. He could envision a day, not far off, when there would once again be a full page of names.

He settled back in his chair and took a sip of the strong, steaming Georgian tea that Metkovich had brought him from the samovar a few moments earlier. It warmed his body and dissipated some of the sluggishness he had felt after another evening of late revelry at the dacha. He decided the sluggishness wasn't due so much to the carousing as to the steam bath he had taken yesterday. His doctors had ruled against it, but he did not believe in doctors. He was a Georgian and Georgians needed a good steam bath now and then to cleanse the system.

It was true he had been neglecting his health and at his age that was not wise. But he would start a new regimen—cut down on fatty foods and alcohol. If he took care of himself, he would live another twenty, thirty years. Just like the old men with their snow-white hair that he'd known in his village of Gori as a child.

Steven Otfinoski is the author of more than 100 books for children, about 20 of which are fiction, most of those involving the supernatural. He has also ventured into the mystery field with two YA baseball mysteries. Research for his debut adult fiction, presented here, began with a nonfiction children's-book project. He has a dark fascination for the subject, which involves a fictional interpretation of history. ¶

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Some of them had lived to be a hundred. If they could do it, so could he.

As for his doctors, what did they know? They were mostly Jews, and he did not trust Jews. And to think that his beloved Svetlana had married one, and that worthless Vasily, too. But he would put these leeches in their place. The machinery was already in place. Soon the wheels would spin and the machine would start up and it would be just like the old days.

Absent-mindedly he began to run his eye down the list. He rarely saw a name now that he recognized. Not like twenty years ago. Then he knew them all. Comrades from the revolution. Generals. Members of his government. All had to be sacrificed for the security of the state. In those days there were some on the list he hated, many he felt nothing for, and a few he held in great affection, at least once. Particularly the old comrades from the revolution. But there could be no room for sentiment. They'd all had to go. History and his own place in it had required it.

As his eyes drifted over the list, he suddenly caught his breath. His eyes widened and then narrowed to a squint as he held the paper close to his face. It had to be a mistake, a misprint. But there was no mistake. There it was, clearly typed in black and white.

Dzhugashvili, Josif Vissarionovich

He stared at the name stupidly. Was it possible there lived another with that selfsame name? Impossible. It was a name he had not spoken or heard for fifty years. A name he thought he had left behind forever in the dusty past, the name he was born with.

He seized the paper, but caught himself before he crumpled it in his fist. A jolt of pain shot up his withered left arm and the gorge rose in his throat. Who dared commit such an outrageous act? It was beyond belief! Whose hand had done this devilish thing? Whoever it was, that person would pay dearly for it!

He could feel the pain spreading out in waves from his arm but he ignored it, submerging it beneath his cold fury. *Someone would pay dearly.* But who was the culprit and how would he proceed to find him?

"Metkovich!" he called.

Almost immediately the secretary, with his long, beaked nose and shiny bald head, scurried in from the outside office.

"General Secretary?" the gaunt little man spoke. He stood there, quivering at attention. He was used to his boss's bark, but not to the flush he now saw in his face.

"When did you bring this in here?" he asked, jabbing a finger at the list.

Metkovich seemed puzzled by the question and it took him sev-

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eral moments to find his tongue. "Why, a few moments before you arrived, General Secretary. Pskov brought it in while I was brewing your tea."

Pskov. He liked Pskov. Unlike the fool before him, he was intelligent and clever. Which meant he was not entirely to be trusted. Was it possible this was his doing?

"Call Pskov and tell him to come here at once," he said.

Metkovich's beady eyes blinked behind the thick lenses of his glasses like a startled fish. "Yes, sir," he snapped, and was gone.

There was no question he had been lax. In the last few years he had let things slide. Peace and power had made him lazy. He had been lax, and this was the result. Someone in his inner circle was defying him, to his face! The boldness of it was enough to make his blood boil. He had to calm down, keep a cool head. Others were watching.

With some deep breaths he quieted the pounding in his head and chest. But the tingling in his bad arm did not subside. He had accepted it as a part of him, like the ugly pit marks etched on his face by a childhood disease.

There was a knock at the door. Pskov, well groomed as always and dressed in a crisp, clean uniform, entered when given the command.

The leader's head dropped, as if preoccupied in reading a letter on his desk.

"You wanted to see me, Generalissimo?"

He slowly raised his eyes, feigning disinterest. But Pskov knew better. Those hooded eyes were like an eagle's and missed nothing.

"Yes," said the seated man. "This morning's list. Where did you get it?"

For a split second the confidence left the pale, still-youthful face. "From Comrade Beria. As I always do, Generalissimo."

"Did you get it directly from Beria?"

"Yes . . . I mean, no. His secretary handed it to me."

"And was Beria there when you received it?"

"I . . . don't know, sir. I think he was in his office."

Pskov seemed a bit distressed, either by the volley of questions or his own unsatisfactory replies. But if he felt any fear, he kept it well in check. He knew how this man he stood before could smell fear like a bloodhound on a fugitive's trail.

"Did you stop anywhere on the way here with the list?"

"No, sir. I came directly here."

"Then the list never left your person?"

"No, sir."

During this exchange, the leader stared steadily at Pskov's face.

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He looked for any sign of weakness, but he saw no tic, no quiver, neither in his body nor in his voice.

The leader waited a few moments before he spoke again. "That is all, Pskov. Thank you for coming in."

Pskov struggled with himself over what to do next. He went against his safer instincts and took a risk.

"Generalissimo, is something wrong?" he said plainly. "Have I in some way displeased you? Please tell me."

The leader's eyes rose once more to scrutinize the other man's face. Then he shook his head offhandedly.

"No, of course not. You are an exemplary officer, Comrade Pskov. Now go."

Pskov took his cue and left.

The leader was perplexed. He could detect no sign of fear or guile in the soldier. But was it possible that in his emotional state he had missed something? The enormity of this act of sabotage against him—and against the state—had shaken him badly. He had to get a firmer grip on himself. He could feel the sciatica on his leg acting up. He fought the urge to scratch it and grabbed the phone to call Beria, then immediately put it down. He would visit his Minister of Internal Affairs in person, without warning. If he had anything to hide, the leader would detect it at once.

His heart was racing, but he stayed calm as he walked past a surprised Metkovich. His boss almost always arrived late, but rarely ever left his office until lunchtime. He gave no reason for this break with habit, just waved a large hand as he sailed by. It felt good to get out from behind the desk. The blood flowed through his seventy-two-year-old body and he found it easier to think, to plan his next step. In his pocket was the list.

Beria was talking to his female secretary, one pudgy hand around her waist, when the leader entered his office. Beria's moonish face registered surprise, but he quickly found the appropriate smile to cover it.

"Josif Vissarionovich, this is a surprise," he beamed. "I was just going over some figures with Miss Koho. . . ."

The leader watched Miss Koho and her ample figure briskly exit the room. He was well aware of Beria's weakness for young female flesh. He liked knowing his subordinates' little flaws and weaknesses. It amused him. But not today.

"What do I owe this visit to, Josif—"

"Stop it. Why do you call me that?"

Beria paused. The leader could see the slight queasiness in his small, chipmunk eyes. "I have called you that for years," he said. "Would you rather I call you something else, *batono?*" It was a term of respect in Georgian. Beria was gently reminding his boss that they were countrymen.

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The leader waited to speak, his face a blank. He looked for signs of nervousness in the Minister of Internal Affairs. But then, Beria was a great actor. One of the best. It was this that had kept him alive these fifteen years. His predecessor, more bloodthirsty but less politically adept, had lasted less than two.

"I was just going over the list . . ." said the leader, changing the subject.

Beria waited, ears pricked, but the leader said nothing more. "Is there something wrong with it?" he ventured. "Some . . . irregularity?"

"Why do you say that?" said the leader, his face expressionless.

"I say it because you seem concerned about something and I want to know your concern."

"You made it out yourself, did you?" the leader asked.

"It came from the Ministry and I went over the names before dictating the final version to my secretary," said Beria straightforwardly.

"You went over *every* name?" the leader's voice was very quiet.

"Oh yes, every name, *batono.*"

The leader's silence was deafening.

"Is there something missing? Or is there a name you would liked removed?" offered Beria.

The leader raised his hooded eyes and glared at his Minister of Internal Affairs. It seemed to him inconceivable that this man of straw would brazenly taunt him. No, he knew his Beria. If he had been a part of such a scheme he would avoid any such talk. *He didn't know. And yet, how could he not?* He felt a sudden urge to hold the list before Beria's little chipmunk eyes, his finger pointing to the damned name. But he checked himself.

"I want nothing changed," muttered the leader. "I just want to know the process the list went through before it arrived at my office. You see, I am interested in such things."

The leader continued to stare, the tyrant's prerogative.

"Do you want me to review the list again and have it sent back to your office this afternoon?"

"No. That won't be necessary," he said with a careless smile. "I will leave you to your . . . work."

Relief flooded Beria's fleshy face. He tried to hide it behind a flurry of concern. "*Batono,* are you . . . all right?" he asked.

The leader swung around and nailed Beria with his eyes. "What did you say?"

"Pardon me, but you look a little pale. You work too hard for us, *batono.* You must take better care of yourself. That is my humble opinion."

"Keep your humble opinions to yourself," snapped the leader. "I have never felt more fit."

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"I am glad to hear that, indeed," babbled the minister. "Excuse me for being so solicitous, but your health, *batono,* is of great concern to me, as it is to all your people."

The leader was not in the mood for his henchman's groveling and grunted something and departed. As he walked through the corridors that separated their offices, his hand felt for the list in his pocket as if it were a talisman.

He told Metkovich that he was not to be disturbed by anyone. He needed time, time to figure out who was the perpetrator of this heinous act and what was his purpose.

He sat at his desk, took the list from his pocket, and stared at it. Beria had called him Josif Vissarionovich. But Beria had called him Josif Vissarionovich for years. Surely he did not know his family name, the name of his youth. But someone did. Was it possible the change was made after Beria saw the list? Had Pskov lied and switched lists? He knew that with one phone call he could have Pskov sent to Lubyanka that afternoon to have a bullet put in his head. He could do the same to Beria, but it would take several phone calls and there would have to be a trial of sorts, for Beria was far too big a fish to hook and gut the same day. But what if others were involved? And what if Beria was as innocent as he pretended to be? It was an odd word for the leader to think of. No one, in his opinion, was innocent. Not really. Except, perhaps, for his mother, that insufferable churchgoer, and his first wife, who had died so young. How she had broken his heart!

But that was all in the past. He had to focus on the present. Someone had done this outrageous thing and planned it well. He would have to retaliate just as carefully. He picked up his favorite fountain pen and uncapped it. Anytime, with a stroke of the pen, he could save a life. That was his prerogative. Yet as far back as he could remember, he had rarely crossed out a name on the list. On the contrary, he had added quite a few miscreants who had been overlooked by the others. There were so many enemies.

Now he raised the pen to strike out the offending name. His hand trembled. Something was stopping him. And then he realized why he couldn't do it. He would need it just as it was on the page. For evidence. He put down the pen and closed his eyes and tried to think. His heart was racing again. The collar of his marshal's jacket was strangling him and he unbuttoned it to breathe. Then he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

He knew he was hated. All the five-year plans and monuments to his greatness couldn't change that. He was hated, and by his own people. It was the price of greatness. Was this the first sign of a new conspiracy against him or the manifestation of one already in the works? He thought of the Jews, but they would not have the courage to do something so outrageously bold.

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A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. He knew from the faint timidity of the knock that it was his secretary. "Go away!" he bellowed. "Didn't I tell you that—"

"But General Secretary—" began the quivering voice beyond the door.

"Come in! What is it?"

Metkovich entered hesitantly.

"What the devil do you want?" barked the leader.

"The messenger from the Politburo has come for the list, sir."

The leader glared at the white sheet of paper and then up at the clock on the wall. It was nearly noon. He had always had the list back in Metkovich's hands by 11:30 so it could go to the Politburo for its rubber stamp. Only then could the orders for the executions be carried out. It was a simple procedure, but today the leader had thrown it off course.

"Tell him it's not ready," he murmured. "I am not yet finished with it."

"Of course, General Secretary," replied Metkovich. "Shall I tell him to return this afternoon?"

"Tell him . . . I will bring it over myself when I am ready," said the leader in a very quiet voice that sent shivers down his secretary's back.

No sooner had the little man left than the leader stuffed the list into his coat pocket, grabbed his hat and overcoat, and was out the door.

The messenger from the Politburo was still standing there, but the leader did not even give him a glance. "I will be at the dacha," he said to his secretary. "If anyone calls, tell them I will return later."

The air outside was cold and crisp. It was nearly March, but spring was still a good way off, which suited the leader. He did not like warm weather.

When the limousine pulled up to the dacha on the edge of Moscow fifteen minutes later, he dismissed the driver, went past the guard at the entrance, and made directly for his private study. Once inside the room, he locked the door. He needed time alone to think and plan his course of action. He set the sheet of paper facedown on his desk—a smaller, more ornate one than the desk in his Kremlin office. He did not want to see the offending name right now, the name he gave up so long ago when he became the "man of steel."

He did not feel like steel now but something more vulnerable and brittle—perhaps lead, a metal that can be bent and twisted into any shape. He lay on the sofa by the fireplace where a fire was roaring, as always, and closed his eyes. He did not expect to be able to rest, but much to his surprise his body was ready for it,

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starving for it. The steam bath had not had the desired effect and he had spent much of the previous night awake.

Before he knew it, he had drifted off into a restless sleep. Suddenly he found himself in the great Hall of Justice. He was in the defendant's box, facing a sea of expectant, mostly unfriendly faces. He was surprised to see who his interrogators were—Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin, and the hero of the revolution, Marshal Tukhachevsky. All men who more than fifteen years ago had stood where he now stood.

"Are you not guilty of crimes against the state?" demanded Kamenev.

"Did you not put to death one million of your own people? And for no good purpose but to feed your own fears and paranoia?" asked Bukharin.

"Did you not drive your own beloved wife to suicide because she could not stand to live in a world that *you* inhabited?" shouted Marshal Tukhachevsky.

He tried to respond to their questions, but they kept firing the accusations at him like bullets, not giving him a moment to defend himself.

"Are you not a traitor to the state and all that it stands for? Have you not betrayed our great leader himself?" asked Zinoviev.

He tried to rise to his feet, but he couldn't. His leaden body wouldn't move. His tongue was leaden, too. He was a prisoner of his own body.

He suddenly felt cold and looked down to see, to his intense embarrassment, that he was wearing only his underwear. He was no longer in the Hall of Justice but in a small, darkened room where the air was close and stale. Suddenly a door opened and a cold wedge of light fell across his bed.

"On your feet, Comrade." The voice was dry and metallic.

When he did not get up, strong hands pulled him roughly from the bed.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" he cried, finding his voice at last.

"You are going on a little trip," the man in the shadows said.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded.

The man said nothing but pushed him roughly towards the open door. "Come," he said, "you have an appointment to keep."

The next instant he found himself standing in a cold, dank room with thick stone walls. Light glared from a naked bulb in the ceiling. He could hear water trickling nearby. It was not a pleasant sound. There was a smell of something rotting in the chill air. He knew where he was, although he had not set foot there in years. The cellars of Lubyanka, last stop for countless enemies of the state.

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"Face the wall," came the order.

"Are you mad?" he cried back.

"Do as I say. Now."

"Don't you know who I am, you fool?!"

"You are Josif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili. You are a convicted enemy of the state."

"Who has said so?"

"Our Great Leader himself!" came the reply.

"That's a lie!" he cried vehemently.

"Read for yourself!" said the man, and held up the list before his eyes.

He stared at it for a long moment, and to his horror recognized his initials in the upper left-hand corner of the sheet.

"Now turn to the wall," said the voice softly, almost kindly.

He slowly did so. He felt the water on his skin and looked up to see where it was coming from, only to realize that it was his own sweat trickling down his face. He put his trembling hands against the damp, sweating wall, his ears echoing with the sound of that dreadful trickling. Then he felt the cold barrel of the revolver pressed against the back of his skull.

He awoke with a start, his eyes bulging with terror. The dream was true. Kamenev and Bukharin and the others were dead, but those who had taken their places were plotting to get him. This was war, and his name on the list was the first shot fired. What a fool he had been to leave the Kremlin! Even now his enemies were taking over the government, seizing power, and plotting his death. He had to get back! The conspiracy he had dreaded for nearly thirty years was finally coming to fruition. But there was still time to crush it! He rose from the sofa and started for the door, then he remembered the sheet on the desk, that cursed list. He turned and started for it, his hand outstretched. He was halfway there when something exploded in his head and the room turned scarlet. He reached for the desk, but it was too far away. He slumped to the hardwood floor. The last thing he saw before the darkness enveloped him was the smiling face of Josif Vissarionovich, the still-smoking revolver clutched in his hand.

The head guard at the dacha was in a quandary. Darkness had fallen and the Generalissimo had not stirred from the house. This was most unlike him. He had gone inside and found the door to the study locked. He dared not knock. He had heard that one of his predecessors had been sent to Siberia for interrupting the great leader's sleep. Not knowing what to do next, he finally called the Minister of Internal Affairs. He explained to Beria the strange situation at the dacha.

"Go knock on the door," he told the guard. The man hesitated

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only briefly; he had been given a direct order and had no choice. He knocked several times but there was no response. He told the minister.

"I will be right over," Beria said.

"What should I do until you get here?" asked the guard.

"Break down the door," came the crisp reply. "But do not touch *anything*. Do you understand?"

He understood. The door was made of metal and did not give way easily. But with the help of two of his subordinates he broke through on his third try. His shoulder was throbbing, but the pain vanished when he saw the leader on the floor, his unseeing eyes staring at the ceiling. He thought of lifting him to the sofa but remembered Beria's orders. If he'd believed in God he would have prayed for the life of his fallen leader, but being a good Communist he merely wished for his complete recovery and waited.

Ten minutes later, Beria burst into the room. He was followed by Bulganin, Malenkov, and Khrushchev.

"Good God!" cried Malenkov, staring at the still figure on the floor.

"Thank goodness you are here!" exclaimed the guard.

"Go outside and watch the front door," commanded Beria. "No one is to be admitted, do you understand?"

"Yes, Commissar," said the guard, grateful to be able finally to do something useful.

The four men stood in a silent circle, staring down at their stricken leader.

After some moments, Bulganin broke the silence. "Do you think he's dead?" he whispered.

None of them dared to find out, but continued to stand and stare. Finally Beria overcame his fear and bent down.

"No, he's breathing," he said.

"I can't believe it," gasped Malenkov. "It's incredible."

"I think he's had a stroke," said Beria.

"Do you think he'll . . . recover?" asked Bulganin shakily.

"It doesn't look likely," said Beria. "He's in a bad way."

"Good God!" exclaimed Khrushchev.

Beria rose to his feet and poured himself a vodka from a decanter on a side table.

"I don't know how I got through today," he muttered, gulping down the vodka. "He came to see me, you know."

"So you've told us," said Khrushchev quietly.

"Are you certain he's done for?" squawked Malenkov. "If he should recover, there's no telling what—"

"What would you have us do?" said Khrushchev. "Ask that guard outside if we can borrow his pistol for a moment and finish him off?"

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Malenkov said nothing but joined Beria at the side table and poured himself a drink.

"It was only a matter of time," said Bulganin. "The old man has been in poor health for years. He thought he was going to live forever, like one of those old Georgian hermits!"

"Let's settle down," said Khrushchev nervously. "We're acting like a bunch of old women. We must keep a cool head."

"That's easy for you to say," blurted Beria. "He didn't come into your office this morning shooting off about that damn list. My God, I thought *I* was going to have a stroke! The whole idea was insane!"

"But it worked, didn't it?" replied Malenkov. "As insane as it was, it worked. We could have landed in the Lubyanka cellars, but instead we're here drinking his vodka while he lies there on the floor . . ."

"And the cellars are where we were all headed, make no mistake," said Khrushchev. "Molotov was already on the outs, but we weren't far behind. He wasn't just planning to exterminate the Jews, but all of us, too!"

Then he went to the desk, crumpled the list in his hand, and tossed it into the fire.

"There. That's done. Now let us call back the guard," he said. "Svetlana and the drunk must be notified that their father has had a stroke."

"And the doctors?" said Malenkov.

"Of course the doctors. Not that they can do him much good now."

Beria was sitting on the sofa now, still sipping his vodka. "I still can't believe it," he whispered.

Malenkov looked uneasily at Khrushchev. "Do you think he can hear us?" he said.

"Of course not. If we're lucky, he'll never regain consciousness."

"Perhaps we should have a word with the doctors," said Bulganin.

"Don't be ridiculous," replied Khrushchev.

"I don't like your attitude, Nikita," snapped Beria.

Khrushchev smiled at him, revealing the wide gap in his front teeth, looking every inch the cunning peasant. "Relax, Lavrenti Papovich. The mice have buried the cat. The day of evil has ended! Now have another drink. It will help you relax."

Beria smiled, but he did not like the way Khrushchev looked at him. As he drank his vodka he wondered if the sun would ever set on evil's day. ●

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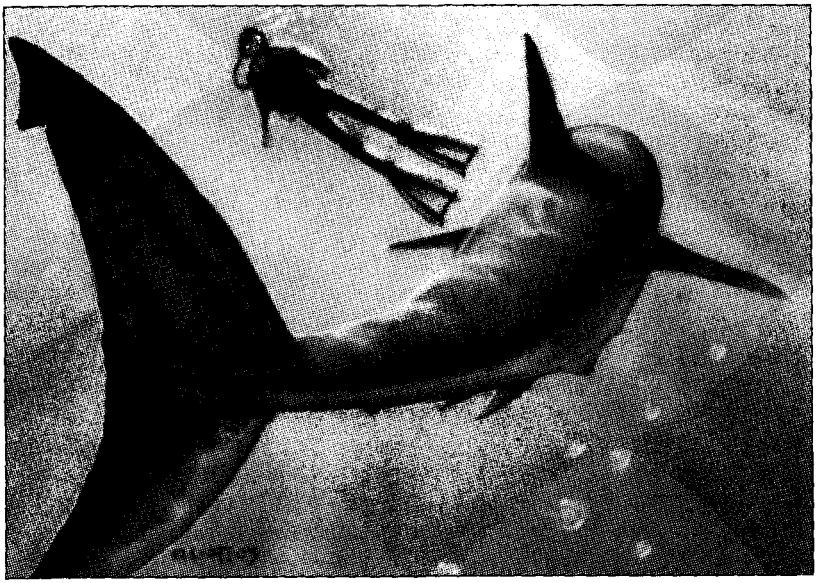

Art by Darryl Elliott

REQUIEM

by Frances Joyce

"But if the cage's camera port was any wider, a great white shark might put his head through it," I objected. "Sharks can't swim backwards, so they'd try to join you in the cage. You might find yourself faced with a big, saw-toothed smile and a tête-à-tête that has too much bite for comfort."

Hugo Anders smiled thinly at this sally. He was tall and fair, a latter-day Viking, and he had the strong, straight nose of one who could've bought his hauberk nosepieces ready-to-wear and off the peg.

Achmat, who had been hammering a dent out of the metalwork in the cabin, came capering up. Dark and Oriental, he made a complete contrast as he stood next to Anders.

"Askies," he murmured.

Anders stood up and Achmat threw his rubber mallet into the storage space under the fitted seats in the stern.

"To stay in the cage will cramp my style, Miss De Montfort," Marc Lanscellas argued, wrinkling his brow. The fuzzy ginger hair surmounting his high, balding cranium gave him a resemblance to

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an intelligent orangutan. "I'll have to swim outside the cage to shoot the footage I want."

I vetoed that with a shake of the head.

"There's rumored to be a great white here in False Bay twenty-three feet long. Our fishermen call him the *Submarine.* My agenda is to prevent him and his pals doing you a mischief. And of course," I added, "the species is protected here. They're the stars. I have to protect them from you *paparazzi.*"

"How about a compromise," he pressed me. "If I perch on top of the cage I'll have the freedom to point the lens in any direction and I'll still be at a safe distance. And the sharks can pull their coat lapels over their snouts if they're shy."

Frances Joyce is a pseudonym of a poet from South Africa who started writing mystery stories for *EQMM* several years ago. Ms. Joyce's depictions of the South African coast near her native Cape Town have always been striking. This time she takes readers further from shore, to the waters around Seal Island, where the great white sharks lurk. Her tale can boast, we think, of a unique method of murder. ✝

I question-marked an eyebrow at Henri. Under his tousled hair his weathered, good-looking face was unmoved. He shrugged. "We take responsibility for divers who follow our safety rules. If you insist on going outside the cage, you'll have to take responsibility for any accident."

"Suits me. Put me down for the first dive," Marc stipulated. "Before the water fogs up with fish bits and the sharks get bored with Homo sapiens."

Dave Finney, untidy-maned and straggly-bearded, was a neighbour of mine in Kalk Bay. He was the kind of weekend fisherman who, if he wasn't casting a line, was spinning a yarn about angling. He'd only recently got hooked on scuba diving.

"Would you like to go down with the first batch as well?" I asked him.

"That would be great, Berenice." He nodded eagerly.

"I'd better go down on that shift. They'll need a babysitter," Henri suggested.

"Henri's a very experienced diver," I reassured Dave. "He always keeps his feet on the ground, even when he's at the South Pole and it means hanging upside down like a bat from the ice cap. Mr. Anders, Dr. Avigor, and Mrs. Barnard, you can go down on the second shift."

Anders frowned slightly. The two women divers resigned themselves good-humoredly.

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Nuredien was at the helm of my fishing boat, the *Cappuccina*, cheerfully whistling a theme tune from a TV serial. The sharks were helping to pay for his son's university education. He called out of the window, *"Die eiland. Rob Eiland. Hy's daar voor."*

"We're approaching Seal Island," I translated.

From a distance we could hear the seals barking and they drew Henri and me to the foredeck like unwary sailors charmed by the singing of the Sirens. Dave and Trixie Barnard followed us. Trixie was a thickset woman in her early thirties with a chignon of dark hair drawn back from a full-moon face.

The island was a large shelf of grey rock, longer than it was broad. We coasted slowly along its perimeter, keeping clear of the white surf that broke along its fringe. The flat surface was crowded with the rounded bodies of sunbathing seals. They turned doglike faces towards us and watched us with large, gentle eyes. Marc had rushed to collect his camera and now began to film them. Shayne Avigor pointed out a nursery of chubby and innocent-eyed pups.

"Aren't they charming?" she remarked in her American accent. She was a dark, sallow-skinned, slim girl. "I've done research on dolphins in the Red Sea at Eilat, but seals are almost as fascinating."

When the mutual inspection, friendly glances, and exchange of civilities between the phocine and human tribes began to pall I told Nuredien to go full speed ahead to our usual spot. Probably a peckish shark or two was down below the island, snuffling and salivating around the larder, but I wanted to attract quite a number of sharks and I didn't want seals in the vicinity. When we were a safe distance away, Achmat, helped by Henri, brought out a coarse-weave sack filled with chopped mackerel and soused with whale oil and tied this chum to the stern to lay a scent trail for the sharks. It was the signal for the first group of divers to don wet suits. Dave horsed around a bit to cover his excitement and cold feet.

"You'll be all right in the cage," Marc encouraged him. "It's when divers swim out in the open sea that they're at risk. Tell me about it! I was once out diving with someone off Millers Point, must be a quarter of a century ago, and my partner was attacked. What was her name again? Yes, a Mrs. Myburgh. A largish woman, she was, with pretty, long dark hair. Had a skinny, delicate, fair kid called Bea. Anyway, we went down and I shot a big Red Roman with my spear gun. I hooked it on her belt and went hunting for another fish. Suddenly all hell broke loose around her. A huge shark had got her and was thrashing around in the water. I was petrified."

Trixie flinched and I didn't feel too good, either. Whatever feelings Dr. Avigor had, she wasn't showing them.

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"Well, then it tore away and vanished. It had bitten off most of the Red Roman and torn a chunk out of her hip as well. I swam back with her to shore. Some people got her to hospital and she recovered there. I lost touch with her afterwards. She must be at least sixty now, or dead," he worked out in some surprise. He glanced out at the waves glinting innocently in the spring morning sunlight. "The water's clear. The visibility's better than average. I'll be able to get some fantastic shots."

Henri had climbed the ladder to the observatory pulpit on the roof of the cabin. Now he gave an exclamation of satisfaction and pointed.

With considerably more delight than a Chinese gourmet on a junk who sees his soup come swimming up to him, the divers saw two dark fins approaching, weaving a sinuous path in our wake. Nuredien cut the engine and Achmat cast anchor. The sharks caught up with the *Cappuccina* and began to circle her, probably on the principle that we'd get dizzy watching them and fall overboard. They were traveling just under the surface and we could see them distinctly. They were between ten and eleven feet long with dark blue backs, white underbellies, pointed snouts, and round black eyes. Great whites.

Achmat raced to the foredeck and lowered the stairs and platform that enabled me to get close to the surface of the water. I ducked under the rails and went down, carrying a bucket of fresh fish. I threw in a mackerel and one of the sharks gulped it down. I saw a light dawn in his eyes that was quite cordial. Actually, I'd been hand-feeding the sharks now for some time, in the same area, and some of them had become quite chummy, if you'll excuse the pun.

As usual, the divers were overwhelmed by the melodrama of being so close to these huge predators for the first time.

"Aren't they magnificent brutes?" Dave exclaimed. One passed beneath him, the white, jagged teeth weighing down the open, underslung jaw. "But they give me the creeps," he added.

There were already four milling round the bows when my favourite arrived. He was a sixteen-footer, a mighty dreadnought. I'd given him the pet name "Sugar Lamb." I could always identify him by a peculiar scar on his back. His intelligent black eye seemed to recognize me as well.

Anders's voice broke in like a dash of cold water in the face.

"You shouldn't try to tame them. You're being sentimental," he said. "They're killers. They got it right sixty million years ago and since then they've just been able to cock a snook at evolution. They're cannibals, too. They're not even born before they're gobbling up their own brothers and sisters. Find people palatable as well."

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From under lids that drooped at the corners, his small, pale eyes flickered maliciously in Marc's direction. "Best to discourage that, a diver would say. But *some,* who should know better, train them to treat divers as convenience foods."

My social antennae quivered. There seemed to be an argument brewing.

"Are you referring to me?" Marc asked incredulously, raising his head from his camera.

"Yes, I am. Sensational stuff, some of your TV documentaries. But you aren't too choosy about the means you use to get it, I hear."

"What means?"

"Those stunts you think up. A friend of yours told me you used to pack a diver's wet suit full of whale meat. Then you'd throw it down into the sea among the sharks so you could film them attacking it."

Anders's tongue was a scourge. Marc's stunt struck me as imaginative but antisocial. Neutrality seemed the wisest position.

"Hi, Sugar Lamb!" I murmured, scratching the vast, sandpapery back as it passed beneath me. He seemed to approve because his tail beat against the keel, thump, thump. And again.

"Sharks can learn. You're teaching them to regard a diver as a packed lunch," Anders concluded.

"Watch this, everyone!" I invited, trying to throw a distracting rat among the bristling terriers. I held out a large yellowtail to Sugar Lamb. Marc eyed this uneasily, fingering the shark's tooth that nestled in gingery chest hair. Sugar Lamb took it delicately, shook it with a growl, and then with a whiplike crack of the tail, dived and was gone.

Marc turned back to Anders. "Sharks have always attacked divers. I'm not educating them to do so," he protested. "I'm not corrupting vegetarians, you know."

"Aren't you perhaps reinforcing an occasional behaviour pattern?" Dr. Avigor suggested quietly.

From the outer fringe Mrs. Barnard's voice suddenly broke in upon the group.

"French sailors used to call the great white the *Requiem* because the mass for the dead begins *Requiem eternam,"* she remarked inconsequentially.

"Brr!" Dave shuddered, laughing.

"Right, let's get down there among the fish, first lot," Henri intervened briskly.

The little bunch of divers dispersed. Dave and Henri strapped on their cylinders. Marc first fitted his video camera into its underwater housing and then followed suit. As they were buckling on their weighted belts, strapping on knives and fitting goggles

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and fins, I gave them a pre-dive briefing.

"Dave, you haven't been down in a cage before. Remember to stay inside because you're safe there. Sometimes divers feel drawn to swim out of the cage and join the sharks. Try to think of that as a suicidal impulse, because it is.

"Marc, you know the risks you're taking. Cameras sometimes fascinate sharks. One may come undulating up towards you, wearing a big, toothy smile. But you can be sure it's not in her mind to ask you for a screen test. Keep your legs in the cage and drop down inside at once."

The divers clumped over to the cage that was resting on duckboards at the stern. It was a specially constructed cubic framework of steel fitted with bars and covered with steel mesh. A narrow, rectangular gap at eye level formed the camera window. A thick nylon rope ran from a motorized winch along the arm of a boom and down to the roof of the cage. It was threaded through a ring and the loop secured by a steel vice fitted with double screws.

With his forefinger Anders traced some gouges in the steel of the cage. "The shark that did that must have broken his dentures," he said.

"Sharks' teeth do fall out," Dr. Avigor said composedly, "but then they're quickly replaced by new ones."

"Unfortunately for us divers," Mrs. Barnard laughed heartily.

Achmat loosed the mooring lines that held the cage to the boat. With the winch he lowered the cage gently into the water until it was just beneath the surface. Henri lifted open the trapdoor at the top and slipped down into the cage. Dave followed him. Marc cautiously climbed on and perched on the edge of the trapdoor opening. Then Achmat lowered the cage carefully until it was about fifteen feet beneath the surface.

We peered down through the haze of bubbles on the surface. With difficulty we made out the cage and the shifting, broken shapes of the divers. A dark shadow drove through the water near the cage. Another materialized from another side and began to circle above the cage. We could see this one clearly. To my annoyance, I thought I saw Marc struggle to his feet and stand on top of the cage. As far as I could make out, he had lifted his camera and was filming the shark swimming above him. Down there Henri would be slanging sign language around that would turn the water a deeper blue and make even the sharks blush, I thought.

Without warning, disaster struck.

An enormous shadow hurtled up out of the dark depths with gaping jaws and struck at the cage with a grating sound of teeth on metal. The cage seemed to swing violently to one side, spinning like a top. Henri and Dave must have stumbled and fallen against the cage because we heard the distant clang of cylinders against

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metal. Marc was bucked off. The rope that suspended the cage suddenly slackened, as if it had been bitten through. The cage fell away rapidly, out of Marc's reach, and descended into the depths.

Shock held us paralyzed.

We could now make out Marc swimming frantically up towards the surface and the boat.

He never reached it.

Death came hurtling in a form monstrous beyond imagination and engulfed him in an explosion of bubbles. The surface of the sea was in a turmoil. From the depths far beneath I saw Henri finning up at a furious pace. He reached the monster that held Marc in its jaws and I saw his arm go back and the glint of a knife as he plunged it into the fish's side. An enormous tail appeared above the surface for a second and then crashed down, spraying us with brine. The leviathan dived and melted away into the opaque shadows with its prey. A diver's goggles with the strap still fastened bobbed up and pitched on the waves. To my unspeakable relief, Henri also broke surface and struck out for the boat.

"Get that chum out of the water," I cried urgently to Achmat. Henri swung himself out of the sea and rolled lengthwise onto the duckboard.

"The shark's got Marc," Henri gasped. "But he's dead. He must've been killed instantly."

"What about Dave?" I asked.

"Went down with the cage. I had to battle to get out of it. It was swinging every whichway and it wasn't easy. So he must still be inside."

We peered down into the sea, but it was now a waste of waters without a sign of any living thing.

"He'll probably decide to stay in the cage," I reasoned. "He won't want to venture out if he suspects there's still sharks around."

"We ought to send out a distress call," Trixie Barnard said. Her bluff, good-natured face showed signs of strain.

Of course. I walked swiftly through the cabin and entered the tiny navigator's cubicle. On the right side of the helm was the radar screen. Above it, attached to the ceiling, was the small square radio and microphone. It crackled and suddenly burst out: "Maid May . . . Maid May." I radioed my friend Police Inspector Cupido. He told me to stand by for a rescue launch and helicopter. I went back on deck and told everyone that help was on the way. Henri frowned.

"While we're waiting for them to arrive the tide may sweep the cage along the sands. We might have trouble finding it. And another thing, in fifteen, twenty minutes, the air in Finney's cylinder will run out. I'm going to go down again. I'll take the rope and try to find the cage to bring it up."

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"Yes, do go," Anders said. "Finney will have the wind up."

"We'll keep a lookout for any sign of Mr. Lanscellas," Dr. Avigor said.

"I'm going with you," I said indistinctly from under the wet suit I was drawing on.

"I expected you to say that," Henri smiled with a nod of approval. He was searching out his shark prod, an arm-length rod with a head that could shoot an explosive bullet into a shark. I strapped on my knife. We inserted our mouthpieces, held our masks to our faces, and slipped gently over the side into the cold water.

It was a silent world we entered, with only the regular roar of our breathing in our ears. Henri grabbed hold of the rope that hung in the light-suffused blue water and we descended into the indigo-tinted depths. My depth gauge read forty-two feet when we reached the sea bed, which was sandy and dotted with rocks. We circled around and found a small reef covered with redbait, mussels, and sea urchins, and thronging with fish. Groves of kelp trees grew in the gullies between the ridges of rock. The brown tresses of the kelp heads swayed in the tide. The reef seemed worth investigating.

We were lucky. We hadn't swum far before we heard the chiming clash of metal on metal. We swam in that direction and found the cage wedged into the end of a narrow corridor in the reef. Dave was rattling his knife against the bars of the cage. He waved with relief when he saw us.

While Henri swam over to the top of the cage and knotted the rope around the ring I swam over to Dave. I reached through the camera port and squeezed his shoulder. He didn't seem to be in good shape. I registered a flurry of agitation overhead. I glanced up at Henri and he drew his finger across his throat and pointed urgently to something behind my back.

A couple of strong beats of my flippers propelled me sideways. The unseen shark that had lunged at me grazed over my back, grating a small tear in my wet suit. I shot into a thicket of kelp and peered cautiously through the fronds.

The shark was only a six-footer but he could still do a lot of damage. He was circling me. I spun around to keep him in view. Some of the kelp ribbons entangled themselves around me. They hobbled my arms and I couldn't get at my knife to cut myself free. Not so good. The shark seemed to realize I was all trussed up like a barbeque chicken and charged me again, mouth agape. Now only the ultimate weapon could save me.

"Voertsek! Scram!" I shouted at him.

He swung away in surprise. A second shark came coasting over the reef. He eyed me speculatively and joined the first in circling me. It looked as if I would soon be surrounded by a frenzy of sharks.

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Then, like Perseus to Andromeda, Henri was hovering near me, slashing at the thick, slippery streamers. In half a minute I was free. We cleared a little space in the kelp around us and trod water back to back. In that short time two more sharks had materialized. There were now four wheeling around us. The black glance of the largest showed he meant business. He lowered his pectoral fins and charged. Then, in mid rush, he suddenly wavered, and with a thrash of the tail swung round and plunged away. The other sharks followed suit. An eerie hush fell on the reef.

Out of the shadows came idling the regal, massive bulk of a great white shark larger than an American sedan. The round eye, large as the palm of my hand, was fixed on us with the calm, unafraid interest of one whose only anxiety when he met an enemy lay in deciding whether it was high or low calorie. An ice glacier started its advance across my scalp. I could hear Henri's heart pounding like a dinner gong. The shark drifted past us in reconnaissance, its nostrils flaring as it took in my scent. It seemed to take as long as a train at a railway crossing to go past. Then, almost simultaneously, a look of recognition came into its eyes and I noticed the odd-shaped scar on its back. Sugar Lamb.

I motioned to Henri. Very cautiously we swam over to the cage. Dave, his eyes staring with fear, swung the trapdoor open. Together we spurted through. Safe inside. I tugged twice on the rope. There was a pause and then the cage jerked and began to move upwards, not too fast, just keeping pace with our breathing bubbles. No shark dared to come near us. Sugar Lamb spiraled slowly up around us. Light spiders were born upon his dark back; they danced gracefully there. A shark had never looked so good to me.

When we reached surface level Henri threw open the trapdoor and hands reached down to help us on board. Nuredien was ringing joyful peals off the ship's bell. Achmat, all sparkling brown eyes and perfect white teeth, winched up the empty cage and tied it fast. Henri and I fell into each other's arms, gasping and laughing in relief. Life, in future, would seem like a gift, as if we'd been given an undeserved second chance. The divers cheered and patted us on the back.

"Mazeltov!" Dr. Avigor cried.

Sugar Lamb was craning his head above the water to watch us. Henri and I scooped up handfuls of fish from the fish bucket and dashed them into the sea for him. He engulfed them politely and dived back into the depths. We shucked our cylinders and equipment. Dave was helped out of his by Anders and Mrs. Barnard. Nuredien, his villainous face beaming like a saint's, emerged from the galley with three steaming mugs of cocoa. Dave took one, but his hand shook a quarter of the contents onto the deck.

"Marc . . . Is he . . . ?" he stammered, looking round.

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"He's dead," Anders said, with an involuntary twist of the mouth.

Dave started to cry.

Dr. Avigor took him by the arm. "You come with me," she said kindly. "I'll give you a sedative and you can lie down for a bit. No sign of Marc's body," she added in a quiet aside to Henri.

"Dave's in shock," I observed to Henri, who nodded. He turned to Anders.

"Why don't you and Mrs. Barnard climb up to the pulpit? You might be able to spot something from there."

I decided to warn the mainland about Dave's condition. In the cabin Dave was stretching out on the sofa and Dr. Avigor was drawing a blanket over him. While I was waiting to get hold of the inspector, Henri joined me in the cubicle. He seemed to be troubled.

"We have to have a talk about the cage and the rope," he said, frowning.

"Did you see the shark that bit the rope through?" I asked.

"It wasn't a shark, though I think someone wanted us to believe that," Henri replied, lowering his voice. "But no shark could have deliberately loosened the vice screws that attached the rope to the cage. Yes, that's what caused the accident. Once we dropped into the cage, the weight, and then the buffeting by that monster shark, dragged the rope loose.

"But how . . ." I began. The radio squawked. "Hi, it's Berenice again. We've got a man here in shock. Could the chopper fly him to hospital?"

"Let me speak to him," Henri interrupted. "Inspector? I think we may have a murderer on board. Yes. I know how, but not who. All right. See you then." Henri turned back to me.

"Listen, Berenice," he whispered, "when that great white hit the cage Lanscellas was standing on top and he was bucked off. Finney and I were also thrown around a bit in the cage. I pulled myself up through the trapdoor. My mind was on Marc and on getting him to safety, but out of the corner of my eye I noticed the rope pulling free of the collar and the collar sliding off. I'll never forget that sight.

"I didn't have time to think about it then; my first priority was Marc. I knew he was in danger. And later my mind was occupied by Finney. But now I've been thinking over what I saw. And what I saw was that the position of the screws was about forty-five degrees off the vertical. Well, I checked that collar just after we left Kalk Bay and I'm quite positive that the screws then were almost vertical. So someone must have tampered with them."

I looked at him steadily. "You think someone wanted to kill one of you?"

"I think the most probable target was Lanscellas. Everyone

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knew he was going to sit on the top of the cage. They'd reason that if the cage fell away he'd be alone in the sea surrounded by feeding sharks."

"Whoever did it, it wasn't someone on the first descent," I reasoned.

"Of course not. My bet is that Anders is responsible. He thought Lanscellas was the pits. He had an opportunity at Seal Island to sabotage the cage. Everybody was up on the foredeck watching the seals and I can't remember that he was with us, can you? I'm going to challenge him right now."

In the cabin, Dave was sleeping. No sign of Dr. Avigor. As we climbed the ladder to the pulpit I looked down on the semi-transparent aquamarine that was blotched with the purple of reefs and seaweed. A fresh onshore breeze was blowing. The two women and Anders looked at us expectantly.

"We have a murderer on board," Henri announced abruptly. There was a collective shudder. "Someone loosened the screws of the vice that secured the rope to the cage." He went on. "Do any of you know who did it? What about you, Anders?"

Angry blood flushed up beneath his fair Nordic skin.

"Me? Of course not. I don't know anything about it."

Dr. Avigor looked grave. I began to feel uneasy. Anders's denial seemed so sincere and vehement.

Then a dire possibility hit me smack in the midriff like the ambush of a shark. My mind made some connections at computer speed.

"Mrs. Barnard," I broke out, "can you remember what Mr. Anders and Mr. Lanscellas were arguing about when I was feeding the sharks?"

For an instant her guilty gaze was handcuffed to the accusation in mine. Then her eyes broke away.

"You can't, can you? Or only a bit. Because you were busy in the stern, weren't you? You'd seen where Achmat kept his rubber mallet. Your fingers might have been too weak to turn the screws, but it took only a few blows with the mallet to loosen them. Perhaps there was a slight noise, but . . . Oh, I know. It *did* make a noise, but I thought . . . we all thought those knocks were Sugar Lamb bumping the keel with his tail."

She must have seen, as I did, the startled conviction dawning in all the eyes turned towards her. And something extraordinary happened. The blunt, affable face melted away, and just for a few seconds another face appeared, one of a creature of malignity and hatred, with rage in her eyes, unmasked and at bay. It was worth a hundred confessions.

The small pulpit was crowded, yet suddenly she seemed to be alone on a desolate island as everyone shrank a little into them-

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selves. They were putting as much distance as they could between themselves and an outcast who had put herself beyond the pale.

I was confident now. "What induced you to do it? You set out to kill one of us, didn't you?"

She was sullenly silent. I'd disarmed and exposed her and she hated me.

"Your maiden name was Bea Myburgh, wasn't it? Bea short for Beatrix. But Beatrix can also be shortened to Trixie, can't it? You are the little girl whose mother went diving with Marc Lanscellas a couple of decades ago. Marc didn't recognise the child in the grown-up woman because you've changed completely out of recognition. Even your voice, if he'd remembered it, wouldn't have brought you to mind. Perhaps he wouldn't have died if only he'd realized that little girls can grow up to look like their mothers. An elfin child can become hefty, fair hair can darken."

I'd hit her hard, but she was quickly recovering her stolid effrontery.

"I was Bea Myburgh," she admitted, "and I used to know Mr. Lanscellas. His name was familiar and I thought I recognized him. Then, when he spoke about my mother, I was sure. I didn't let on who I was because I didn't want to open old wounds.

"You see, it was all his fault. . . . He was responsible for that shark attack on my mother. He should've known that to tie fish to her belt was to turn her into live bait for a great white. She didn't know. She was just a novice he'd persuaded to go along with him.

"She recovered physically, but it affected her mind, and her personality changed. She began to steal. Then she was arrested and she lost her job and her reputation. She was a broken woman when she died. And I loved her. . . . He didn't know what he'd done to her and he never bothered to find out. You can imagine how much I disliked him. But I never tried to kill him. I never touched the screws on the rope collar. They must've worked themselves loose by accident."

She was going to try and clear herself by lying. But I knew she was a killer. Not all the white sharks live in the ocean. I read the same opinion in Henri's eyes.

As for myself, I felt a glow of happiness within. Strong bonds of trust and esteem had grown between Henri and myself because of the trial we'd been through together. I remembered how once we'd gone diving together in heavy seas. Swimming back to the shore was a struggle that really tested our strength. As we reached the surfline, an enormous wave reared itself up behind us. Just before it broke on top of us Henri seized my hand. Then it dumped us in a resistless, churning storm of sea and sand. Henri never let go of my hand. We fought together to get our heads above water and made it safely to the shore. ●

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WIDOW PRESUMPTIVE

by Peter Turnbull

Frank Maxwell forced the door. The door that was "the locked door," the door that had remained shut for as long as anyone in the Maxwell family could remember. The story was that the door had been locked and then the one and only key misplaced, lost, it seemed, forever. Because the door was the door to a small room, the space afforded therein not being needed in so large a house, there had been no reason to force the door and replace the lock. Not only was the room not needed, but the room was at the very top of the house, that part of the house which is impossible to heat in the winter. In the winter, Frank Maxwell, his wife, and their two children hibernated in the kitchen and their bedrooms, leaving in excess of thirty other rooms unused. There just had never been the incentive to force open the door of the locked room.

A master of the police procedural, Yorkshireman Peter Turnbull has worked primarily on a series of books and stories set in his native county over the past few years. The York series features investigating officer Hennessey and medical examiner Louise D'Acre, plus an appealing group of supporting characters. The latest Turnbull novel, *Dark Secrets,* was published by Severn House in England in January. U.S. readers can purchase it on the Web. †

Spring arrived in the Vale of York, and, in turn, gave way to the vast blue skies of summer, which caused the old house to creak and groan as if the ancient timbers were thawing and then expanding with the heat, which, Maxwell mused when a particularly loud crack from a main beam caused the dog to bark, was probably what was happening. At the beginning of summer, the Maxwells would migrate from the winter quarters and expand into the remainder of the house, not unlike, Maxwell often thought, animals moving to high pasture for the summer Alpine grazing. It was on just such a hot day, when he was alone in the house, his wife and the boys visiting York for the day—a day when he was pottering, when the muse was not upon him—that he thought of the locked door and curiosity overcame him. He went to

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the toolshed and collected a handful of assorted tools, returned to the house, and went up two flights of stairs to the locked door. He was not a carpenter, he had little skill with tools, but once he started work he felt the bit between his teeth and knew he would not abandon the job until the door was opened. The wood was English oak, the door flush with the frame, the lock heavy and solid, and it took Frank Maxwell three-quarters of an hour to open it. At first, it was a waft of sour air which attacked his nostrils and which he waved away like a man waving away a storm of flies; then it was the gloom into which his eyes could barely penetrate, a gloom lifted only by a small dusty window set in the roof; then there was the smell beyond the stale, sour air, a sickly-sweet smell. Then, only then, was it the sight.

It was his father.

His father who had disappeared four years earlier.

He just knew it was his father, lying there, faceup. He recognised the wrist watch, and the favourite jacket. And anyway he would have known.

He just would have known.

George Hennessey viewed the body, the decayed corpse which still had identifiable features, still in an expensive-looking tweed jacket, woollen trousers, and sensible, solid-looking shoes. Dr. Louise D'Acre knelt beside the body, dressed in white coveralls with a gauze mask over her mouth. She stood, keeping her head down to avoid the low beam of the sloping ceiling, and walked towards Hennessey, who stood on the threshold.

"I think he was murdered, Chief Inspector." Dr. D'Acre lifted the gauze from her mouth. "No . . . no, I don't think, I feel sure that he was. There's definite damage to the windpipe. I'll have him removed to York City for the postmortem, with your permission."

"Just a few more snapshots for the album." George Hennessey smiled. "Then, by all means."

"Do you know who he is?" Louise, Dr. D'Acre, peeled off her latex gloves.

"Believed to be one Charles Maxwell, known as 'Cherry,' for some reason. Charlie, Chuck, Chaz I can understand, but Cherry as short for Charles, never in my life. . . . But as we say in Yorkshire, 'There's nowt so queer as folk.' He disappeared about four years ago."

"Misplaced rather than lost, I'd say." Dr. D'Acre forced a smile. It was rare in Hennessey's experience that Dr. D'Acre allowed humour to intrude into her work.

"That's probably, nay, certainly, a better way of putting it." Hennessey returned the smile. The Scene of Crime officer's camera flashed and the man then nodded to Hennessey as if to say, "All done now, sir." Hennessey turned to Dr. D'Acre. "That's us finished.

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You can remove the corpse at your will, thank you. I'll go and have a chat with the fella who found him."

Hennessey walked down the long echoing corridor of the house, descended two flights of stairs to the entrance hall, and crossed the floor of the sitting room to where a man sat, brooding, in a high-back chair in a bay window with twelve-foot-high panes of glass which looked out onto a split-level lawn bounded on either side and in the distance by tall shrubs. Hennessey asked the man if he could join him, and the man indicated the vacant chair opposite him. Hennessey lowered himself into the creaking leather, creaking as his joints did, though the latter creaked with a stabbing pain which served to remind Hennessey that long-looked-forward-to retirement beckoned. "Are you able to answer a few questions, Mr. Maxwell?"

The other man said yes, but was wide-eyed, pale of complexion, clearly shocked, as if experiencing a different reality. "It might do me good," he added, forcing a smile at the mottled-skinned, silver-haired police officer, noticing as he smiled the wisdom and the wounding in Hennessey's eyes. "It'll bring me back to the matter in hand. It's not often you find your long-lost father, and find him dead. My old man turned up after four years—dead. How many people can say that?"

"*It's one for the golf clubhouse bar.*" *Hennessey saw the irony in* the statement. "But not for a while, I think."

"To think he's been up there all the while . . ." Frank Maxwell was a well-set man in his forties, with flowing silver hair which tumbled down to his shoulders. He'd spread comfortably as middle age had reached him, but still didn't look out of place in T-shirt, faded denim, and trainers. He was, thought Hennessey, the sort of man who could wear the clothing of someone twenty years his junior and make the image work, or "carry it," as he believed was the correct expression. "I opened it on a whim, took me nearly an hour."

"How long has it been locked?"

"For as long as I can remember. Though clearly someone had the key all along because they unlocked it and then locked it again about four years ago."

"So it seems. But you grew up in this house?"

"Yes . . . me and my sister. I own it now. Mother signed the lease over to me and my sister. I bought my sister out. So it's mine."

"Generous of your mother."

"Well, she went off with her fancy man, said that it would come to me and my sister anyway, so we may as well have it sooner."

"Still, generosity isn't the word."

"You should see the house she lives in now."

"Bigger than this?"

"Smaller, slightly, but the furnishings, the value of the contents,

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the servants, the ability to heat the entire house, even in winter. This house is a sink for money. . . . Living here is like standing on top of the moors in winter wearing nothing but your boxer shorts, tearing up ten- and twenty-pound notes. But we hang on to it because it's an interesting building and appeals to us more than a box on a housing estate. We're both artists, you see, we don't take to conformity easily. She's a potter, I'm a painter. . . . I do commercial work to keep the bills paid but my heart is with my creativity . . . but, yes, I grew up in the house and the door to that room has always been locked. As you have seen, it's right at the top of the house, under the apex of the roof. We don't need the space, so there's been no motivation to open it. I was doing nothing today, just pottering about, the door came to mind, and I said, 'Right, Maxwell, all these years you've been saying that when you got an hour to spare you'd force the door, so here's your hour.' Once I said that to myself, I couldn't resist the curiosity, that which killed the cat—confess I understand that proverb now. Collected a few tools, went upstairs, and started work . . . and . . . oh my . . . it's my old dad, all right, 'tis he, 'tis he. 'Tis his corpse, I should perhaps say, 'tis his corpse."

"As you say." Hennessey's eye was caught by the sudden appearance of a magnificent bird on the lawn and a dazzling display of feathers. "Peacocks!"

"Yes, there's a few, my father introduced them. They don't normally come so near the house. They're quite valuable."

"I imagine."

"I possess the fantasy that one day I'll utilise the outbuildings to breed tropical birds; there's some serious money in it. So I'm told."

"Tell me about your father."

"He was a businessman. He did quite well from humble beginnings, as you see. He bought this house, it's late Victorian, difficult to heat. In the winter we hibernate in a few rooms. Anyway, he disappeared, my father, about four years ago, when he was in his mid sixties. Just didn't return home, or so Mother said. I was living away from home then, married with children of my own. He took a taxi from his office for a lunch date and was not seen again. We reported him missing, the police searched the house and accepted our explanation that the door, *that* door, had been locked for, well, heavens, in excess of forty years, and so they didn't force it."

Hennessey looked uncomfortable.

"Eventually Mother wrapped up the estate; he was deemed dead in the eyes of the law when he hadn't turned up alive and well after two years from the date he had been reported missing. I don't know the details of his estate; Mother is a woman with a forceful personality, difficult at times, 'I'm right, I'm right, I'm right,' when invariably she's not. But that's her. She and father seemed happy with each other . . . he was very biddable . . . it

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wasn't a warring house. Just the four of us rattling around in all the rooms, save one, during the summers and living in a small part of it in the winters. . . . But it was a peaceful house—so long as Mother got what she wanted."

"What was the nature of your father's business?"

"Agricultural supplies—'Maxwell's Supplies'—feed, fertilisers, agricultural workers' clothing, tools, everything except plant, by which I mean tractors and trailers and ploughs."

"Any enemies?"

"Not that I am aware of, but if you're a businessman, you swim with the piranhas. It goes with the territory and I believe some people thrive on it. But I don't envy them, I just want to paint. I don't make any money out of it, but I count myself a lucky man: a rambling, interesting house, bought and paid for, a supportive, like-minded wife, two perfect children doing well in school . . . my cup runneth over. At least, it did until about an hour ago."

"Where is your mother now? Living away, you say?"

"Not so far away. Richmond. She and her second husband have a prestigious house."

"So you say. But second husband . . . ?"

"When he was assumed dead, she was free to remarry. Which she did about two years ago, indecently hurried, I'd say, did it as soon as she could, though they'd been making no secret of their relationship."

"And who is her new husband?"

"He was the manager of father's business. He's younger than my mother. She's in her sixties, he'll be in his forties, about my age, but they seem happy. All was well, really, until . . . they were happy, we were happy, my sister's married well, she and her husband and children are happy . . . but despite that, each day I thought of my father . . . wondering . . ."

"As you would."

"A dear man, he lived for his family. He wouldn't desert us . . . I knew some ill had become of him."

Hennessey watched a peacock spread its plumage and begin a regal strut across the clipped lawn. The vast lawn, the huge house . . . the bird just looked the part. "What happened to your father's business?"

"Mother sold it."

"Sold it?"

"Sold it. It was hers to sell, as was this house. Father left everything to her in his will. He loved her deeply, you see."

George Hennessey, who had been a police officer for the vast part of his working life, and who had reached a stage where little surprised him about human nature, suddenly realised that he was in the presence of a very naive man. He listened, but his mind was probing.

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"Mother didn't want the house, you see. Me and my family were in a large bungalow; we sold it and I bought my sister out of her share of this house, so I came to own it, complete with locked room, which was just the locked room."

"Until a short time ago."

"As you say. Poor Mother, she'll be devastated."

Hennessey thought, 'Probably not as devastated as you think, sunshine,' but said nothing, feeling that he was shortly going to be a most unwelcome caller on one Mrs. Maxwell, widow presumptive.

"And your family, where are they at the moment?"

"Gone into York for the day. They'll be back soon." He glanced up at the wooden clock which stood on the mantelpiece. "Back anytime now, in fact."

"I'll have to ask you not to go to the room, neither you nor your family." Hennessey stood. "It's a crime scene."

Hennessey returned to the room and arrived as the police officers were carrying the body bag containing the body out and into the corridor. He stepped aside to allow them to pass and then reentered the room.

It was a small room, bare floorboards; a chest of drawers, empty save a lining of newsprint which was dated sixty years earlier; a single dusty window, a steeply sloping roof. It was, he thought, originally designed to be a broom cupboard, if indeed it was built for any reason at all. It may have been built for no other reason than that there was room for a room and would thus have appealed to the Victorians, who loved complicated designs. He studied the room closely. The first thing he noticed was that, unpleasantly, the room did not have a through keyhole; it could only be locked and unlocked from the outside. The door, he noticed, fitted so snugly with the floor that the gap between the two was only of pencil-line width. A fly could not crawl through the gap—no flies, no maggots—and hence the mummification of the body. Hennessey was certain that the man had been placed dead, or dying, in the room, rather than murdered after being held captive here for some indeterminate period: The windows would not be intact had he been a prisoner here, and there would have been graffiti scratched on the wall. He might also have died in a hunched-up position or on his side rather than the laid-out position in which he was found. He stepped back and stood on the threshold and surveyed the room. Somewhere, he told himself, somewhere there is a clue in this room, a clue that will help to unravel the mystery. He couldn't see it. That meant, he reasoned, that he was too close or too far away, and so he crouched and on aching, bending knees, fell onto all fours and looked beneath the chest of drawers.

A book of matches behind one of the legs of the piece of furni-

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ture. It lay there, opened, as if beckoning to him.

He reached for it, realising that after four years, any latents would not be able to be identified.

Black on red, it was a freebie from the Cicogna Club, Amsterdam.

He took a cellophane production bag from his pocket and placed the book of matches inside it.

Hennessey returned to the ground floor of the house and found a still-shaken Frank Maxwell explaining events to an ashen-faced wife and two ashen-faced teenage children. He tapped on the door to announce his presence and entered the room where he and Maxwell had sat talking with each other, and where Maxwell was presently answering urgent questions from his wife and children.

"I was just explaining—"

"Yes." Hennessey held up his hand. "I overheard. Can I emphasise that it's vital that no one goes into the room."

Maxwell nodded. "I'll see to that. In fact, we won't go up to that level of the house at all."

"I'd appreciate it." Hennessey paused and then asked, "Did your father travel at all, overseas, I mean?"

"No. He was almost xenophobic, hated all foreign places, loved England. He used to say, 'All our days are limited, we must spend them in the place we love.' He wouldn't even travel to Scotland or Wales if he could help it, but it was territory rather than the folk there, you see. He was more than happy to pass the time of day with anyone of any nationality, just as long as he did it in England."

"I see. Do you know of a Dutch connection in respect of your father's business or social life?"

"Dutch?"

"Erik," said Mrs. Maxwell. "He's Dutch."

"So he is."

"Erik?" Hennessey pressed.

"My mother's new husband, my stepfather. As I mentioned, he was the manager at Dad's business, he saw to the day-to-day running of the place."

Hennessey said that he'd see himself out.

Hennessey drove to York, to Wiggington Road, to the York City Hospital, to the pathology laboratory. Though prior to entering the building, he scanned the car park and was delighted to see a red and white Riley, circa 1947, gleaming in the sun, parked between two very modern cars which, in Hennessey's eyes, only served to make the vehicle more than usually distinctive. In the pathology laboratory he found Dr. Louise D'Acre, in green coveralls, conducting the postmortem on Charles "Cherry" Maxwell, whose body lay on a stainless-steel table with a starched towel draped over the "private parts." Also in the room was the youthful, in Hennessey's

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eyes, Sergeant Yellich, observing for the police. He stood deferentially at the side of the room, also dressed in green coveralls.

"Sir," Yellich said as Hennessey entered the room, he also by then in the requisite green coveralls.

"Yellich." Hennessey stood beside Yellich.

"It's murder." Dr. D'Acre spoke without glancing up at Hennessey. "His skull was fractured as if to knock him out, though that blow may have killed him, but just to make sure he was then strangled. There's bruising around his neck which could only have been made by a ligature. The body has been mummified, which surprised me, lying in a room for four years. If he was murdered at about the time he disappeared, then I would have expected a greater degree of decomposition."

Hennessey told her about the near-airless condition of the room, the impossibility for insects to enter it.

"That would explain it," Dr. D'Acre said authoritatively, and added that her report would be typed up and faxed to him as soon as possible.

As Hennessey and Yellich were walking across the car park towards their respective cars, Hennessey asked Yellich to fax the Dutch police to request anything they had on the Cicogna Club in Amsterdam. He said it might be nothing, but equally, equally it might be something, and he told Yellich about the book of matches left at the murder scene. "Credit it, or credit it not," he added, "but Mrs. Maxwell's second husband is a Dutchman."

"Well, I'm a Dutchman," Yellich said, smiling.

"Who also happened to be general manager of Maxwell's business at the time of Maxwell's disappearance."

"I *am* a Dutchman!" Yellich continued to smile. "I assume we'll be paying a house call in the not-too-distant?"

"Oh yes . . . yes . . . I think so. But I want a bit of background first. Get that faxed and I'll pay a brief visit. I'll see you back at the station."

"I remember that day well. Very well indeed." The woman spoke with a distinct Northumberland accent. "He took a taxi into York for a lunch date. We never saw him again."

Hennessey sat, as he had been invited to do, in front of the woman's desk and glanced out of the window across the well-kept grounds of the company to a distant skyline, beyond pasture and arable land, underneath a vast blue sky. "Do you know with whom he had lunch? Or where he went?"

"I don't, I'm afraid. It wasn't in his diary, either, so it was a last-minute arrangement, which meant it was likely to be a personal rendezvous rather than a businessman's lunch. It was unusual for him to do that, but not out of character, about four or five such

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last-minute lunches in a restaurant in York every twelve months."

"I see." Hennessey grunted. "I get the picture. Normally a hard-working businessman."

"Very, I'd say. I've worked for businessmen who work in the morning, have 'lunch,' and spend the rest of the day sobering up. But not Mr. Maxwell. He asked his staff to put in a good eight-hour day and he led by example."

"And after he disappeared?"

"We carried on as normal with Mr. Van Langen at the helm. He kept it going for two years and then Mrs. Maxwell sold it. We are now part of the Cicogna Empire."

"Sorry . . ." Hennessey's mouth opened. "The what empire?"

"Cicogna, though we have kept trading as 'Maxwell's Agricultural Supplies' because the familiarity of the name is a good marketing tool. It's a bit like Rolls Royce being owned by BMW, which it now is."

"Yes, I know, but you can still buy a Rolls Royce and a Rolls Royce is still a Rolls Royce."

"Exactly."

"But the name Cicogna?"

"It's an Italian word. It means stork, the bird that delivers babies . . . but it's actually a Dutch company. . . . Cherry will be turning in his grave, he didn't really like foreign things. . . . But why the interest, may I ask? Has he turned up?"

"Yes, he has, in a manner of speaking. . . . You'll be reading it in the *Yorkshire Post* tomorrow so I have no reason not to tell you." And so Hennessey told the woman, who by the sign on her desk was Brenda Cahill, personal assistant, of the opening of the locked door. As he did so he noticed her complexion pale, her jaw slacken, and her eyes widen.

Hennessey returned to Micklegate Bar Police Station, close to the ancient gateway to the medieval city and where Harry Hotspur's head was once impaled for public display. He signed in and checked his pigeonhole and then walked to Yellich's office. He asked Yellich if the Dutch police had come back with anything on the Cicogna organisation.

"They have indeed, boss." Yellich smiled. "But there's nothing particularly shady about it, not that they know of, anyway. It's an organisation, quite well known, likes publicity, a bit of a household name. It started about forty years ago when a guy opened a filling station which coincided with the birth of his first child, so in recognition of that and in honour of his Italian wife, he called the company Cicogna, which is Italian for—"

"Stork. Yes, I found that out myself. The name of the family behind the Cicogna organisation, it wouldn't be Van Langen, would it, perchance?"

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"Perchance it would, boss."

"Grab your coat, Sergeant. We're going for a drive."

"We are?" Yellich stood.

"We are. We're going to Richmond. To see that not-so-sweet lass of Richmond Hill."

Laura Van Langen, once Laura Maxwell, revealed herself to be a small woman, but a woman with a fixed expression of determination, and with a cold gleam in her eye. She was, thought Hennessey, like many short people, made of steel. She was in her early sixties, possibly mid sixties, a head of dyed hair, clearly a woman not giving in to the years gracefully. The dyed hair said so, and the layers of makeup reinforced the impression. The woman eyed Hennessey and Yellich suspiciously, and with little effort made to conceal her hostility.

"Police." Hennessey showed her his ID.

The woman caught her breath. "Yes?"

"We'd like to have a few words with you. And with Mr. Van Langen, too. If he's at home."

"Yes . . ." She began to look nervous. "He's at home."

Erik and Laura Van Langen received the police in the drawing room of their home, which Hennessey found to be a little smaller than Maxwell's house, and he saw what Frank Maxwell had meant. The Van Langen's home was comfortably furnished, and expensively so, and had a money-no-object feel; not for these, thought Hennessey, the obligation to hibernate in a few rooms during a bitingly cold vale winter. And now, in the summer, it afforded cool shade from the sun.

"Mrs. Van Langen . . ." he said, sitting on a wide settee. Yellich, in a chair, observed, and observing, thought the more youthful Erik to be a softer target than the older, more hard-bitten Laura. "We have found your husband's body."

Silence.

The Van Langens glanced at each other. Erik Van Langen paled and seemed to shrink. "Oh . . ." he said.

"You have something to tell us, Mr. Van Langen?" Hennessey, seeing a flaw in the Van Langens' defensive armour, leapt at it.

"He's nothing to tell you," Mrs. Van Langen said furiously, and glared at her husband.

"That's his decision."

"Say nothing," she snapped as Erik Van Langen seemed to continue to shrink.

"You're implicating yourself, Mrs. Van Langen."

"How?"

"By giving out the strong message that you and your husband have something to hide."

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"There is no indication of anything."

"I can understand your defensive position," Hennessey said, looking around him. "You do have a lot to lose."

"Such as what?"

"Well, all this, this beautiful house, the furnishings, these contents . . ."

"Why should I fear losing it?"

"Because your husband was murdered. He was hit over the head with sufficient force to fracture his skull, and he was then strangled. Then he was put in a room which supposedly had been locked for years, but someone had clearly found the key and kept the fact to themselves. He had been placed there by some person or persons with connections with the Cicogna Club in Holland, which seems part of the Cicogna Organisation, which in turn is owned by the Van Langen family. So what happened?"

Van Langen stood and walked to the window, looking as if he wanted to be many miles away. Laura Van Langen continued to glare at him.

"We found a book of matches at the crime scene," Hennessey explained, "from the Cicogna Club."

"Idiot!" Laura Van Langen screamed. "Idiot. Idiot."

Erik Van Langen turned to Hennessey and said, "I think my brother will return the business, Charles's business, to Charles's son and daughter. He is an honourable man."

"Quiet!" Laura Van Langen hissed. "Say nothing."

"He is a man of honour. If he wanted to keep it, it would be difficult to force him to give it up. He bought it in good faith. He lives in Holland, a court case to recover it would be costly and lengthy, but Paul is a man of honour, he will return it."

Laura Van Langen sank back into her chair, as if she disbelieved what she had just heard.

"It's better." *Erik Van Langen turned to his wife.* "It's better this way. I'll tell them. I cannot live with it any longer."

"Well, I can."

"Mr. Van Langen . . . ?" Hennessey prompted, " . . . but I must caution you not to implicate yourself."

"We had a relationship," Erik Van Langen explained. "I didn't know what she was going to do . . . she . . ." he pointed to his wife, "she lured him back to the house . . . then phoned me at work, told me to come round after the day's work was over. I did so. He was dead in the hall. She had killed him, she said that now we could be together. I had no idea . . ."

"But you helped hide the body?"

"Yes. She said she'd found the key to the locked room and we could put him there and move him later. I just did what she told me, I couldn't seem to resist, even though I knew it was wrong.

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But we never did move the body, even when we sold the house; it wasn't as though we were selling to a stranger. It is, as the English say, 'Out of sight, out of mind.'" He paused. "I knew it would be discovered someday. She sold the house and the business. We came here to live out our lives in great comfort."

Laura Van Langen sat stock-still, continuing to stare at her husband in disbelief.

Later, much later, when Laura and Erik Van Langen had been charged with murder and conspiracy to murder respectively, and had been detained in custody pending their appearance before York City Magistrates Court the following morning, being the first stage in the committal proceedings, Hennessey returned home, fed and exercised his mongrel, and then drove to the village of Skelton and to a half-timbered house on the outskirts of the village. In the kitchen of the house he sat holding hands across the table with a slender, short-haired woman in her forties, saying nothing, but listening to the scramble of teenage feet on the floor above. Eventually it went quiet and Louise D'Acre said to George Hennessey, "Well, it's gone quiet, shall we go up now?" ●

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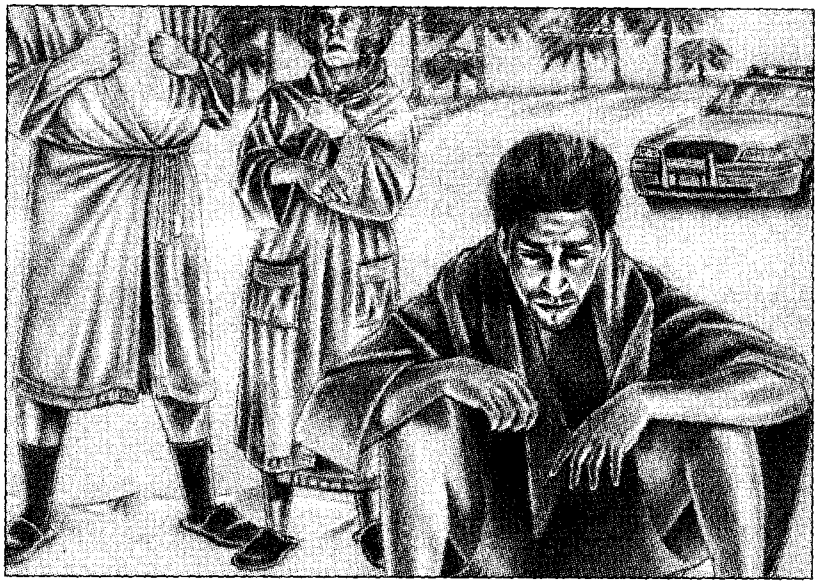

Art by Daniel Galonaugh

THE RAFTER

by John Lantigua

Homicide Sergeant Roberto Rivas of the Miami Beach Police was summoned to the scene just after three A.M. The body had been discovered on a quiet stretch of beach just behind Condo Canyon on Collins Avenue. It was a young man whose shirt was unbuttoned and who bore one small bullet wound in each pectoral muscle. The neat holes looked like breathing ducts in an amphibious creature. But he wouldn't be moving about either on land or sea anymore. He was dead.

A crowd had drifted out of the condos, summoned by the sirens: elderly women in curlers and men with tousled hair. Many of them were Latins and they chattered in Spanish. The red roof lights of police cars whirled, painting the people and the surf a crimson color.

Sergeant Rivas crouched down. The clothes were dry, indicating the corpse hadn't been in the water. He touched the dead man's cheek. It was just starting to cool, which meant he had been dead no more than an hour. The sergeant stood up, removed a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his white guayabera, and lighted one.

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It was a tactic of old homicide detectives. It neutralized the smell of death.

The dead man's body had been searched. His wallet was found in his back pocket. His name was Murillo, and he carried almost two hundred dollars. Around his neck was a chain of what appeared to be genuine gold. So the motive was not robbery. On the back of the dead man's right hand Rivas saw a phosphorescent ink stamp, like those used by South Beach nightclubs. On the back of the left hand he found another. The man had apparently been club-hopping before drifting down to this end of the beach.

John Lantigua was nominated for an Edgar Award in 1987 for the novel *Heat Lightning* (Putnam), and in 2001, when his first short story was published in the Signet anthology . . . *And the Dying Is Easy,* he received a Shamus Award nomination for it from the Private Eye Writers of America. We are pleased to welcome him to our pages; for his debut he's chosen a haunting Florida subject. ¶

The first patrol officers to arrive had knocked on the doors of all the condo units that faced the surf. They reported to Detective Rivas that none of the residents had witnessed the crime. About two blocks away they had found a group of young men, possibly gang members, drinking beer in a nearby parking lot. They insisted irately that they knew nothing about a shooting, but the questioning continued.

The evidence at the scene seemed to support their claims. The officers had tracked the footprints of the dead man up the sand, from the direction of South Beach, to that spot where he had died, but had found no prints of any other person leading away in any direction. That was strange. The tide was going out, and had been for some time, so it was not a matter of evidence being erased by the surging sea. Despite the absence of prints leading away from the murder scene, Rivas dispatched a pair of officers up the sand in one direction and another two the other way to search for suspects or witnesses.

Then he glanced again at the glass facades of the condos. Finally, he turned the only way left to him, toward the sea.

To the south, he could see cargo ships at anchor, waiting to unload in the Port of Miami. On the shore nearest those vessels, the sky was illuminated with the neon glow of South Beach, its seaside hotels, restaurants, and nightclubs. A large kleig light scanned the sky, probably marking the opening of a new club, although at the moment, to Rivas, it seemed to be searching for the murderer.

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But that was many blocks away, and this stretch of beach around him was relatively dark. A three-quarters moon cast a faint trail on the sea, the only light. The surf pounded the beach and washed across the sand with barely a whisper.

Sergeant Rivas stared into the darkness, his eyes narrowed in a squint, and then he pointed into the water.

"What is that beyond the waves?" The uniformed patrol officer next to him peered out over the water. Then he swiveled the searchlight attached to the side of the police cruiser and scanned the sea. Suddenly, less than a hundred meters from shore, the beam illuminated a floating structure made of inner tubes. A tattered piece of cloth was suspended over it, apparently as a shield from the elements. From under that cloth they saw an arm waving. Just above the sound of the surf they heard a weak cry. The patrolman gaped at Rivas. There was little doubt what they were witnessing: a Cuban rafter was just arriving onshore.

Of course, a tremendous commotion ensued. Many of the condo residents were Cubans, and the arrival of a rafter, a fellow exile, was always a very dramatic event. Two of the patrolmen stripped to their shorts, swam out, and helped pull the raft ashore against the tide. It was constructed of three inner tubes, truck-sized, lashed together with plastic rope. Regular hemp would have rotted in the salt water. Large white plastic bottles, old bleach containers, were tied to the tubes all around, designed to carry drinking water at first and provide buoyancy as they were emptied. A narrow board was wedged or tied between the tubes and supported a tattered sheet which formed the sun shield. It was a classic rafter construction.

The man they carried from it was also a classic rafter. He was young, about thirty. The very young or very old found such a trip too difficult and most women could never make it alone. Most rafters were young men.

Wet, unshaven, cheeks sunken and eyes bloodshot from days at sea, he wore long pants and a long-sleeved shirt to protect him from the sun, which they appeared to have done. His feet were bare, pale white, and puckered from the water. The expression on his face was a combination of despair and ecstasy. The despair of the voyage and the ecstasy of arrival. Rivas had seen that very same gaze on faces of other rafters who had come ashore on Miami Beach.

The two patrolmen carried the rafter up the sand and sat him down. He examined the people around him with a dazed expression, as if he had expected never to see living human beings again.

"Are you all right?" Rivas asked him in Spanish.

The young man nodded excitedly, almost like a hummingbird. He answered in breathless, Cuban-accented Spanish, and with a

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voice that was a raspy whisper, maybe from the salt air or maybe from trying to shout over the sound of the surf.

"I thought you people would never see me," he said, his eyes rolling wildly as if still affected by the waves. "About an hour ago, the tide turned. I had almost reached the shore. But suddenly the tubes were being taken out again. I paddled against the tide, but I was getting too tired to do it anymore and I was too weak to swim. The tide would have taken me away for good."

Sergeant Rivas looked at him and then glanced at the covered corpse just feet away. The irony impressed itself on him. One young man had died and another, of approximately the same age, had been rescued in the same spot, only minutes later. A tragic symmetry.

It also occurred to Detective Rivas that the very proximity of the two events—the death of the one man and the arrival of the other—might work in his favor. If the rafter had been floating just off that beach for the last hour, he might, just might, have seen something that would help solve the killing. He had not been so far from the shore and the moonlight was strong enough to illuminate the sand.

Rivas hitched his pants, crouched down, tipped his Panama hat back on his balding head, and identified himself to the man.

"I know you must be exhausted, my friend, but I wonder if you saw anyone moving on this beach in the hour before you were rescued?"

The bedraggled man turned and looked at Rivas with an expression full of confusion. Rivas couldn't blame him. The rafter had just been rescued, after almost being lost at sea, and a stranger was asking him what seemed to be a pointless question. But the man eventually nodded, as if he were slowly emerging from a dream.

"At one point, a swell lifted me up and I thought I saw someone," he said, staring into the middle distance. "I started to scream with all my strength. But then I descended again and the waves blocked my view. When another wave came and raised me again, whoever had been there was gone. There was no one." Hope seemed to rise and then ebb in the young man's eyes and his voice.

Sergeant Rivas wondered if the person the rafter had seen was the club-hopping man with the gold chain, and if in the interim between the two waves someone hadn't committed the crime, leaving the dead man sprawled on the sand and out of sight. Or had he seen the murderer?

"It was only one person you saw? Are you sure?"

The other man shook his head as if trying to shake the fatigue from it. "I don't know. It was dark. My eyes were tired from trying to see someone, anyone, but I think it might have been two people."

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"Did you note how they were dressed? Anything about them?"

The other man was still shaking his head.

"Did you hear anything?" Rivas didn't want to mention gunshots, so as not to put words in the mouth of a potential witness.

"I only heard the sound of the surf," the man said. "I had wanted to hear it for days and now it was fading further away." He sounded frightened and pained at his near demise.

Rivas patted the other man's wet arm, stood up, and stepped away as tenants from the condo building approached with comfort for the latest Cuban exile. The new arrival was quickly provided with drinking water and was wrapped in a blanket. He was told to drink the water slowly so as not to become ill from an upset stomach.

Rivas instructed the patrol officers to call immigration officials. A message came back that they would be on the scene within a half-hour to take charge. Officers returned from the parking lot where the young beer drinkers had been detained. They were questioning them one by one, but so far had come up with nothing. Rivas instructed them to keep at it. He asked another patrolman to check the corpse for gang tattoos. None were detected.

A resident emerged from the condo building with food for the rafter, a plate of *picadillo* with Cuban bread and a beer. Warned again to go easy, the man nonetheless ate hungrily. At one point he turned and asked what was under the sheet about ten yards away.

"A fellow was murdered here tonight," Rivas told him.

The other man's mouth fell open. He stared at the lifeless form, fright all over his face. It was the last thing Detective Rivas wanted to tell a new arrival. It would confirm all sorts of stereotypes about violence in Miami. It would make the man feel he had washed up on a dangerous shore, the wrong shore.

The sergeant gave the man a few minutes to eat, drink, and absorb the fact that he had survived. As the new arrival calmed down, maybe he would remember more clearly what he had seen on the crest of that one wave. But the detective had only a short while before the immigration agents arrived and took him away.

The rescued man asked for a cigarette and Sergeant Rivas complied, lighting it for him. Then he hitched his pants, crouched down next to him again, and asked some rudimentary questions.

He learned that the man's name was Martin Mendez. He was thirty-one years old, originally from Matanzas on the north coast of Cuba, east of Havana. It was from there he had set off three days before.

Sergeant Rivas's brows flinched with interest and admiration. "Three days. All the way from Matanzas to Miami. That's almost three hundred miles. You made pretty good time."

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Mendez beamed. "The current coming up from Cuba is very strong this time of year. I was moving very quickly."

Rivas drew on his cigarette and nodded. It was true that late spring and early summer were the best times to try to make it from Cuba to Florida on a raft. Melting snows in the United States glutted the rivers and eventually the Gulf of Mexico and sent a large strong current very close to Cuba before it swept back to the north. A Coast Guard officer had once explained that to him.

"If you live on that north coast of Cuba, it's like a streetcar coming right to your door," said the officer.

Rivas glanced at the raft, which rested near the edge of the surf.

"You set off by yourself? That's very daring, very unusual."

Water had dripped off Mendez's hair and doused the cigarette. The sergeant gave him another and lighted it for him. Mendez drew on it.

"I came by myself because a friend of mine, who was supposed to sail with me, decided at the last minute not to come. He was scared. Me, I decided to come anyway. I had made up my mind. I wasn't going to wait."

"And you saw no ships along the way?"

"Oh, yes, I saw ships. But they didn't see me. The first night, in the passage between Cuba and Key West, there were fishing boats at a distance. I think they were shrimp boats. But I was moving so quickly, I swept by them before dawn and they didn't hear me or see me. The second and third days I saw large cargo ships heading south into the Caribbean. I waved, but I was too far away. Finally, last night, one of the cruise liners leaving from Miami almost sailed right over me. I could smell the lobsters cooking and hear the dance music, but it was so loud they couldn't hear me. The only creatures who did pay attention to me were the sharks."

Rivas winced. "You weren't hurt, were you?"

"No, I guess I didn't look good enough to eat." Mendez laughed then, the strange, slightly desperate laugh of a castaway.

Detective Rivas stood up. Another patrolman had returned. He had contacted the next of kin of the dead man, a brother in Little Havana. After the shock had passed, the man had told the officer about some trouble his brother had recently encountered. It was over a woman. Another man had been jealous and had issued threats. No, he didn't know the name of the woman or the jealous suitor. That was all.

Other officers, sent to search the beach, returned with their reports. They had found people on the beach, but only couples taking advantage of the isolated shore for a bit of romance. One couple had been taking full advantage when they were approached by the officers. They had obviously neither heard nor seen anything

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but each other. Rivas sent the officers back to question all the couples again, to make sure they were not acquainted with the dead man. For all he knew, the "jealous suitor" was celebrating the death of his rival right there on the beach.

The officers disappeared again into the darkness. Detective Rivas gazed at the corpse and was struck again by the irony of the two men sharing that stretch of sand. They were so much alike—both Cuban, about the same age, same slim build, both attractive, except one guy wore a gold chain and the other guy was in rags. And one was dead and the other alive.

Rivas's attention was distracted by the arrival of the immigration agents in their INS windbreakers, ready to take charge of the new arrival. Rivas didn't have much time. He crouched down again.

"I wanted to ask you one last thing about something you mentioned."

"What was that?"

"You said a cruise ship almost sailed over you last night, heading south."

"That's right. I could hear the champagne corks popping, but no one noticed me."

Rivas frowned. "You know, that is very strange. Today is Thursday and no cruise ship leaves here on Wednesday. None that I know."

The dazzled Mendez searched Rivas's eyes. "Well, maybe I was mistaken about the night. Maybe it was the evening before. One loses track of time when stranded at sea."

Rivas shook his head dolefully. "No, that doesn't make sense, either. No cruise ship departs during the weekdays, not in this season. They all leave on the weekends, after their passengers have completed their work weeks. That's the way the business operates. It's very, very strange that you saw that ship, all the lights, smelled the lobster, heard the corks popping and the music."

Mendez frowned also, as if pained by his own inability to think straight. But then his eyes widened as if he'd found an answer.

"It must have been a mirage. They say men lost in the desert or at sea sometimes have visions. I must have imagined it. I must have wanted so much to be found that I created such a ship in my mind."

Detective Rivas nodded. "That must have been it. You were at sea so long you started to see things."

Rivas reached again for his cigarettes. Mendez accepted one. Rivas patted his pocket.

"It appears I'm out of matches."

Mendez reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out matches

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wrapped in a clear plastic bag to keep them dry. He held a lighted match out to Rivas. Instead, the detective reached out for the book of matches and removed it gently from the other man's fingers. On the cover was an advertisement for the "All-American Tire Company of Miami: Fifty Years of Fixing Flats." Rivas read those words, looked at the raft made of truck tubes, and then glanced back at the rafter.

"I didn't know All-American Tire had a branch in Cuba."

Mendez stared open-mouthed at the matches, as if he suddenly didn't know what they were. He appeared to be about to speak, but he didn't. Instead, he gazed exhaustedly, vacantly into Rivas's face. After several moments, he turned mournfully to the corpse. Rivas lit the cigarettes.

"You weren't arriving, you were leaving, weren't you? Trying to go to Cuba, or anywhere else, against the current."

Mendez shrugged and spoke as if he were addressing the dead man. "What was I to do? She wouldn't stay away from him. It was the clothes, the money, the gold chains. What could I do?"

Rivas nodded in commiseration. Policemen didn't make much money, either. He had lost women along the way. And he had never owned a gold chain.

He waited until they both finished their cigarettes, told the INS agents they could go home, and then led "the rafter" away, the big kleig light still searching the sky over South Beach. ●

"I prefer to think we're in a gated community."

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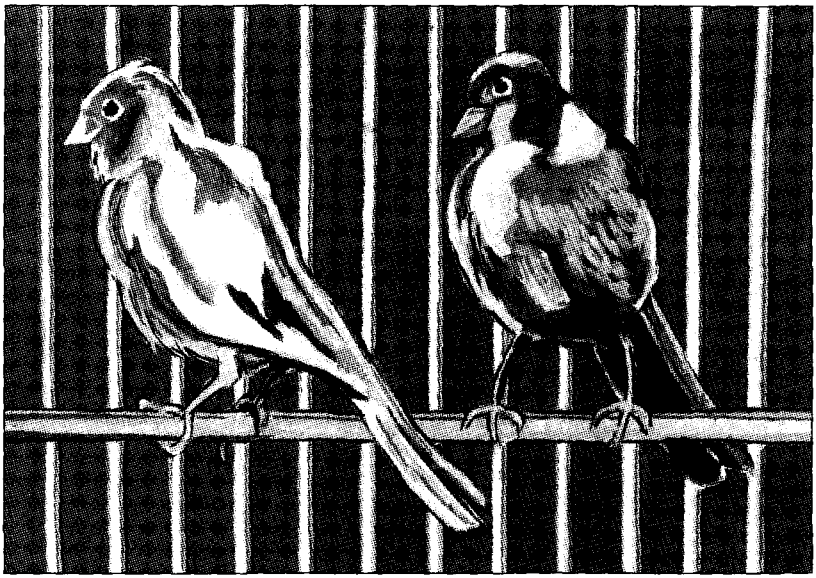

Art by June Levine

THE MAN WHO KILLED TWO BIRDS

by H. R. F. Keating

What really pleased John James were the times when he managed, as they say, to kill two birds with one stone. Any neatly economic feat of that kind filled him with quiet satisfaction. Quiet, but intense. Something of a chess player, when he contrived a move, for example, that put either of two pieces at the mercy of his queen, it was all he could do as he swooped not to shout aloud in triumph.

But, however much he delighted in economy, he was no economist. He had no such high-flown ambitions. He had never even thought of going to college. A simple qualification in accounts-keeping had been enough for him. He knew his gift was not so much for figures themselves but for the trick of seeing a neatly economic solution when it was there to be seen.

So he had been happy to take a routine job in the accounts

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department of Margison Metal Products, a firm in the city manufacturing steel office furniture. But, thanks to this gift of his for seeing how things could be done more economically, it was not long before he began to rise up the department's ladder.

When he learnt that Hornton Margison, the stick-in-the-mud old owner of the firm, used two different suppliers of steel sheeting, he daringly asked to see him and pointed out that by pitting one against the other he would get a much lower final price. Then, later, when he heard a rumour that Dimshaw's Desks, a small concern in the nearby town of Market Cavenham making well-crafted wooden office furniture, was in trouble because such things had gone out of fashion, he saw a neat opportunity. Taken over, the firm could be used to put a finish on metal desk bodies that Margison's could easily produce. Again he told old Hornton Margison. Again the idea paid off handsomely.

H. R. F. Keating, one of Britain's best crime novelists, is also a distinguished scholar of the form whose achievements in that area were recognized recently in the U. S. with the George N. Dove Award for the Serious Study of Mystery Fiction. Mr. Keating's studies of the mystery include *Sherlock Holmes, the Man and His World* and *Crime and Mystery: the 100 Best Books.* His latest novel, published in England in 2001, is *A Detective in Love.* ✝

At last he was given a desk just one place below Miss Stephens, the long-time head of the department. It was one of the new ones from Market Cavenham that had been installed when he had succeeded in persuading his boss to replace ancient typewriters with computers. Miss Stephens, who alone had insisted on keeping her aged wooden desk, was possessed of a rigid distrust of anything new, a good head for figures, intense curiosity, and a passionate interest in a variety of cage bird called the Nottingham canary. Her fascination with these might have been something merely to endure as she went on and on, chippety-chip, extolling their virtues at every opportunity. Except that, summer and winter alike, the champion singer of the birds she had bred—the actual process delicately left to occur in her absence—would be installed in a large cage hanging from a stand beside her desk and be encouraged with disgusting little tweety sounds to sing and sing.

And John James found this singing intensely irritating. It was infuriating enough when it was dinning into his ears, but it was yet more intensely irritating when it ceased and he found himself waiting on tenterhooks for it to begin again. Frequently, walking back to his lodgings at the end of the day, he would find himself

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puzzling and puzzling away at finding a nicely economic way of eliminating the nerve-tautening on-and-off, off-and-on twittering. But, beyond hoping that one day Miss Stephens would retire, he failed to come up with an answer.

He could, of course, have left the firm himself. But there was a snag. No other firm, he knew, would match the salary that reluctant step by reluctant step had been conceded him by prim and puritanical old Hornton Margison. With the unimpressive paper qualifications he had, no one would know what he was capable of.

But one day a solution did occur to him. The lowliest of the clerks in the department was a girl called Brenda. And Brenda was a distant cousin to Hornton Margison. So it had come to him that if he could persuade Brenda to marry him, old Hornton might bless the union with a promise to retire Miss Stephens and all her ever-singing Nottingham canaries and make him head of the department and eventually perhaps more.

Ha, ha, killing two birds with one stone. Then, too, he thought, as a bonus I could simultaneously deal with my increasingly urgent sexual desires and live in more comfortable circumstances.

Plain, pudgy Brenda accepted him at first asking. However, his neatly economic strategy proved to be less successful than he expected. Hornton Margison made no move to signal his approval of the marriage, beyond providing a barely adequate wedding present. Miss Stephens stayed, and each day brought in a champion Nottingham canary. And, almost as bad, before very long, in little more than a year, in fact, he found he had fallen into the sort of chess situation where one simple miscalculation results in losing your queen. Brenda, though she was a good cook and enjoyed making a model of magazine comfort out of the house he had put himself into precarious financial circumstances by acquiring, was not at all interested in what she would persistently call "that sort of thing."

However, it turned out that soon enough he was able to see how this unbalance in his life might be righted. When Margison Metal Products had taken over Dimshaw's Desks, it had become necessary for someone to go to Market Cavenham at the end of each week to check over Dimshaw's rudimentary accounts, in the time before the takeover in the hands only of a single untrained bookkeeper. But in the summer following his marriage it turned out that Miss Stephens had allowed both the senior accounts clerks who normally performed Dimshaw duty to go on holiday at the same time. So she delegated the task to John. At Market Cavenham he realised at once that Dimshaw's bookkeeper, one Kitty Wright, though by no means a beauty and an appalling mathematician, was a young woman with a twinkle in her eye.

He began to entertain vague thoughts, and back at his desk next

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day he told Miss Stephens he thought Dimshaw's accounts needed more checking than they had been getting. "Very well," she snapped, plainly feeling he was questioning her decision to use the other clerks, "you had better go over there each week yourself."

For some months John saw no neat way of converting the vague thoughts that had led him to acquire this tedious weekly task into concrete actions. But then during a few moments of idle chat after he had adjusted and approved the week's figures it emerged that Kitty, for want of any more interesting social activity in sleepy Market Cavenham, was a regular attender at the Friday meetings of a chess club in the Dog and Duck pub. A possible solution to his difficulties at once presented itself to him.

He took to going to the club himself each Friday evening, and soon found, as he had guessed, that Kitty, however much she liked the company there, was not much of a chess player. But this hardly mattered. Soon she had let him see she was ready for other games than chess. And, since his Brenda, who liked nothing better than to go out for an evening's Bingo, had happily suggested that chess in Market Cavenham would be "a nice hobby" for him, he felt he had managed to achieve once more a neat balance.

So he had. Until summer-holiday time came round again.

In each of the two years he and Brenda had been married, they had spent his fortnight by the sea at Bognor Regis. It had been all right. If dull. But now John was reluctant to be away from Market Cavenham and the games he played that were not chess. However, there seemed to be nothing for it but to do what he and Brenda had done before, and to resign himself to living for a couple of weeks a life in suspension at Bognor Regis.

It might have been all right, more or less. Except that Miss Stephens announced that she would go over to Market Cavenham herself on each of his absent Friday afternoons. No harm in that. Only . . .

Only somehow Miss Stephens, poking and prying in her customary way, found things out. She did not find out, as perhaps she had expected to, that Dimshaw's accounts were being milked by her Number Two at Margison Metal Products. She could not have done. John was strictly honest, in money matters. Nor did she find out that John went to the chess club in the Dog and Duck on Friday evenings and that Kitty Wright happened to go there, too. They no longer did. What she did find out was that John and Kitty went hurrying away to her flat on those evenings.

So when John came back from Bognor Regis, tanned a little but not full of rekindled enthusiasm for work, Miss Stephens told him she had something to say to him and would do so after the office had closed. He was happy to stay late. This was not a Friday, and he was not being kept away from his well-balanced double life.

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Alone together in the big office, Miss Stephens faced him.

"Mr. James," she said, "I have to tell you this. I might have simply gone to Mr. Margison and told him. But I feel I owe you at least the chance of explaining yourself."

"Explaining myself?"

What had he got to explain? Had someone, in his absence at Bognor Regis, poisoned the current Nottingham canary, and did she somehow suspect him? Well, true enough, he had frequently darted venomous glances at whichever of the maddening songsters was onstage. But surely . . .

"Mr. James, what is it on Fridays that keeps you over at Market Cavenham after Dimshaw's Desks is closed for the day?"

What on earth was she . . .

"But— Well, I visit a chess club in a pub there, the Dog and Duck. All very innocent, I assure you."

"I dare say that the chess club is innocent. But don't try to tell me that you have ever been there more than two or three times."

"Well, what if I haven't?"

"Just this. Do you think Mr. Margison will be happy to learn of the disgraceful behaviour of one of his most senior, trusted employees with a certain Miss Kitty Wright?"

For a moment he was on the point of laughing out loud. Then he thought.

No, prim and puritanical old Hornton Margison would not be happy to learn that his "trusted employee," married to his own distant cousin, was making love each Friday evening to another woman. One frosty blast would wither away the trust built up over all the years of his employment. The neat economic balance between good housekeeper-frigid wife on the one hand and feckless but accommodating mistress on the other would tumble away to nothing.

"And you intend to tell Mr. Margison what you have nosed your way into discovering?" he asked in sudden fury.

"No, Mr. James, I do not. I realise that you and I are not friends. Don't think I haven't seen you often enough looking at my beautifully singing canaries as if you would like to wring their poor little necks. Don't think I am not aware that you feel you could step into my shoes here and persuade Mr. Margison into more of your crazy schemes. But nevertheless, I will give you this much. I will allow you to go to Mr. Margison, tell him what you have been doing, make whatever apologies and promises you can, and see if they will save you from what you so richly deserve. But I warn you: Unless I hear that you will no longer be visiting Dimshaw's Desks, I will unhesitatingly tell Mr. Margison what you have plainly failed to tell him yourself."

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"Thank you, Miss Stephens," John said, not at all in a gracious way.

He turned on his heel and left the room.

But he did not leave the building. He had to think. He went into the men's toilets, and paced up and down the tiled floor. The truth of the matter was, he realised, that he himself was in that chess situation where one or another of his best pieces was going to be taken without his being able to do anything about it. Either his bishop (his wife, good cook, and good housekeeper) or his knight (delightfully tricky-moving Kitty) would have to be sacrificed. But which?

And why couldn't it be neither?

Bloody Miss Stephens. Why hadn't she kept her poky old nose out of his affairs?

Then suddenly an idea blossomed in his head. A wild idea. A wicked idea. An unbalanced idea.

All right, if I do have to lose knight or bishop, there's one thing I will do. I'll take one of her favourite pawns. Some satisfaction at least in that.

He went straight back to the big empty accounts office. Grinning to himself, with for the first time in his life a spurt of malicious delight, he picked up the reading lamp discarded from his own desk and left in the corner ever since the modernisation. With one strong tug he ripped the wire out of its base. Then, in a moment, he pushed the plug at the other end back into its familiar socket, and, taking the wire's two bared ends, he attached them to the metal stand of Miss Stephens's big hanging birdcage.

It may not be a neat economic answer, he said to himself as he straightened up, but never mind. When that bitch opens the cage door—plastic knob on it, all right—and puts inside it whichever Nottingham songster she brings in tomorrow, I have only to reach back and flick on that switch and as soon as the little creature flies down from its swinging wooden perch . . .

Next morning he arrived in good time and sat at his own desk, tapping away at his keyboard, aligning the rows of figures, and waited. Miss Stephens came in, prompt as usual, the current champion singer hopping about in its carrier. She turned the plastic knob of the big cage and pulled open its door. She opened the carrying-cage door. The little canary fluttered straight in onto its perch and began to sing.

"Oh, you darling," Miss Stephens cooed.

Then she turned round, abruptly transformed from sloppy pet lover into sour dragon.

"Mr. James," she said, giving him a cold, knowing smile, "shouldn't you be having a word with Mr. Margison? I know he's just come in."

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John got up, reaching quickly down to the switch behind him and flicking it on.

"If you think I should, Miss Stephens," he said.

He walked over to the door leading to the outer office of Hornton Margison's own sombre chamber, the Nottingham canary up on its perch twittering full blast behind him.

Just as he was on the point of asking Jean, Mr. Margison's secretary, if her boss was disengaged, a loud, ringing scream came from the accounts office.

Jean jumped up, rushed over to the door, pulled it open. Behind her, John saw Miss Stephens on her feet staring in horror at the big hanging birdcage. And on its floor, he was delighted to find, there was lying a small golden-yellow shape.

But . . .

But suddenly Miss Stephens flung out both her arms and in a wild hysterical swoop embraced the coffin cage.

And fell down, dead.

John, going into the big room and casually stooping to pull away the still-live wire, secretly smiled.

Well, he thought, it seems that after all I have killed two birds with one stone. ●

Whodunnit?

by Michael Z. Lewin

Joe's body slithered to the floor without
A sound. Had not Randolph, the lame Balkan
Butler, come around collecting drained wine
Glasses, who knows how long Joe'd have remained
Undiscovered, unremarked. With a pained
Expression, Randolph said, "Some evil swine
Has done for Father Joseph. You talk and
I'll call in some police detective lout."

Guests looked at each other round the Mission
Table: secret son, debtor, blackmailer,
Lover, and a lawyer all grew paler.
Empty glasses refilled with suspicion.

No one left. It would be an all-nighter.
Who did it? I did, of course: the writer.

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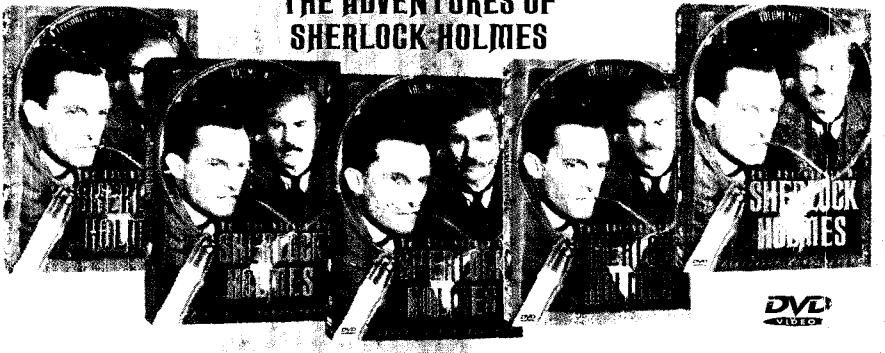

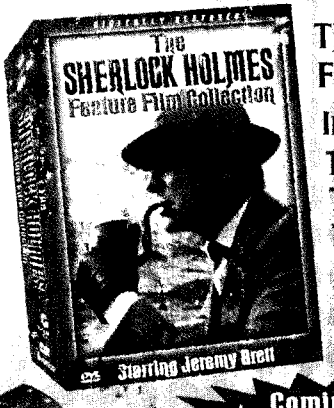

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